

BLACK & WHITE THOUGHT: BELIEF AND DOUBT
IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

by

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Kevin Eugene Early

"Wish I could to dream
For I dream the
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly."

--Langston Hughes

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"IT'S A WHITE THING": RELIGION
AND SUICIDE IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

By

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Suicide among black Americans occurs in the African-American community at about half the rate with which it occurs among white Americans. Why is the black rate suicide in America low? One answer that has been offered in the literature is that the church's influence is an essential factor in low suicide rates in the black community and provides mediation or buffering of social forces that would otherwise lead to suicide. The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which there is empirical support for this answer.

The specific theoretical framework for this study follows one line of interpretation from Durkheim's theory of suicide. In this interpretation of Durkheim, the place of black Americans is viewed as anomie and disorganized and

suicide should be higher than it is. It is not higher, according to this view because the church and other institutions provide integration and buffers against a high prevalence of suicide that would be expected from high levels of deprivation and strain among blacks. This hypothesis of the buffering effect of the black church against suicide is the working hypothesis for the study.

This is a qualitative and exploratory study in which data were collected through face-to-face interviews of pastors of black churches and through administration of a survey questionnaire to black church congregations. Thirty pastors were interviewed. Interviews with pastors included general questioning about their views of suicide and eliciting their responses to four vignettes portraying suicide situations and crime and drug scenes. The questionnaire survey was administered to 120 congregation members to elicit their attitudes, opinions, beliefs and feelings toward suicide. Findings from this study indicate that there is consensus among pastors and congregations in terms of their attitudes and beliefs concerning suicide. Pastors and a majority of their congregations condemn suicide as unforgivable sin and suicide as being a "white thing" that is alien to them and a denial of what it means to be black.

The findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the church does provide a supportive climate that helps to

keep the black suicide rate low. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are provided. The theory-guided research reported here goes beyond what is currently available in the literature and should provide the basis for further testing of the tentative conclusions suggesting a basis for future research to do this testing.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Theme of the Study

There has been relatively little attention by research scholars to the social forces in African-American suicide. This is most likely because the rate of suicide in this group is comparatively low. While this stance is understandable and defensible if one assumes attention should go to where problems are shown to have the highest rates, it is not sociologically defensible. Indeed, the variability in rates of suicide across racial groups is a compelling reason to focus attention upon both high-and low-rate groups. The question is why is there relatively little black suicide. One answer that has been offered by scholars is that religion and family in the African-American community provide amelioration or buffering of social forces that would otherwise promote suicide.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which this answer is a good one. Specifically, the focus is on the part played by the church in constructing and reinforcing a particular social meaning of suicide (attitudes, norms, values, and beliefs) that may act

as a counter or buffer against a higher prevalence of suicide than might be expected from the same social forces involved in other forms of deviance such as crime and drugs.

The literature suggests that the church and its interaction with the family has been a major influence in the low rates of suicide among African Americans, but there has been no direct empirical investigation of this. This study is not able to provide a definitive answer to the question of how important religion has been in keeping the black suicide prevalence low, and no systematic comparison with the white community or religious groups is made. The study does allow a basis for at least tentative conclusions about the empirical reality of a religiously based protective climate or set of social meanings and expectations in the black community that define suicide as beyond the pale, an especially unacceptable or unthinkable act for blacks.

The social meaning of suicide includes the norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding suicide and the response to suicide and suicide attempts in the "religious community." The argument is made that these views are NOT confined there, but are shared in the larger black community. This is different from Douglas's (1967) investigation of the social meaning of suicide, which concentrated on communications leading to specific meanings of suicide by individuals responsive to suicided actions. Ultimately, the social meaning of suicide in the black

community is communicated to individuals. But the focus here is on the content of the shared social meaning in the black community rather than on the process of acquiring those meanings by individuals. This emphasis on the church-based view flows from the crucial part of the social fabric in the black community that is believed to be played by the church. The church is a strategic place to explore the social meaning of suicide in the black community because of the historical centrality of the institution of religion and its relation to the family and social life in that community. This centrality does not mean that the influence is one-way. The social meaning of suicide in the church in part reflects some secular beliefs and the place of blacks in American society.

The literature describes the influence of the church as pervasive in the black community. Therefore, the moral and social views promulgated by the church leaders and adhered to by the active church participants should be influential in the views of the black community including those on suicide. I do not attempt to demonstrate this influence in the community studied, but the assumption of the centrality of the black church is common in the literature and is stated unequivocally by the church leaders in this study. Urban sociology, the study of the African-American family, and the study of the African-American community all point to the church as one of the key elements of the African-

American community. Moreover, modern sociological theory and the research on the African-American experience clearly define religion as a crucial part of the social fabric in the African-American community. This study is primarily an exploratory ethnography that draws upon (1) the researcher's experience as a participant in the religious life of the African-American community; (2) semi-structured interviews with pastors of established Black churches; and (3) questionnaire responses from church members.

Organization of the Study

The theoretical framework and a review of the literature is contained in Chapter 2. The literature on African-American suicide is reviewed and the working hypotheses are outlined in Chapter 3. Research questions, sampling and data collection procedures, and analytic techniques are described in Chapter 4. A discussion of the results of this investigation are presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Conclusions, limitations, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research are discussed in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF SUICIDE

Durkheim's sociological approach to suicide has always aroused considerable interest by research sociologists. For the most part, however, applications of Durkheim's theory of suicide and research designed to test it have neglected the issue of African-American suicide. However, when the issue is raised, Durkheim's influence is apparent. The Durkheimian perspective serves as the beginning framework for this study as well:

By the time Durkheim attempted to explain and classify suicide in the late nineteenth century, empirical correlations had been firmly established attributing suicide rates to a wide range of social factors (e. g., race, heredity, imitation) and, to a lesser extent, individual factors such as mental disorder (Robbins, 1968, pp. 3-15; Douglas, 1964; Turner & Smeihel, 1961). It is important to view Durkheim's classic study, *Suicide* (1897/1951), in the context of the developed tradition of European thought concerning suicide. These fundamental ideas have been summarized as follows:

- (1) Suicide is normal.

- (2) Suicide, as any meaningful social action, may be studied by statistical means. The stability of suicide rates, in itself, proves the validity and reliability of the official statistics (which were used to compile the rates).
- (3) The stability of suicide rates indicates that suicidal actions are caused by factors external to the individuals committing them.
- (4) The most important of these external factors are social, particularly certain stable properties of society (i. e., social meanings causing specific patterns of social actions (Durkheim, 1897/1981; Giddens, 1988, pp. 3-15)).

"The originality and vitality of Durkheim's study did not lie in the empirical correlations contained in his work" (Giddens, 1988, pp. 3-15). Such empirical correlations had already been documented by previous writers such as Legeyt, Morelli, Chailouan, and Weyner (Giddens, 1988, pp. 3-15). Durkheim's study was an outgrowth of these earlier works. Durkheim took ideas such as "egoism" (detachment from structural relations in groups) and "lack of moral restraint" as variables in suicide rate (Giddens, 1988, pp. 3-15; Turner & Murgoley, 1941, pp. 154-158). Hence, Durkheim's major contribution was to reformulate ideas already advanced by theologians, philosophers, and sociologists into a sociological theory of suicide which

"became the standard reference for all subsequent sociological interest in suicide" (Kilns, 1988, p. 387). In *Suicide*, Durkheim's primary objective was to explain such an individual behavior as suicide as a sociological phenomenon and "make a persuasive case for the importance of the discipline of sociology" (Ritner, 1988, p. 14; Maheshwari, 1978, p. 87).

In Durkheim's perspective, suicide is a phenomenon whose causes are primarily contingent upon the nature of an individual's integration into the social fabric and the ability of the group to regulate its members. Durkheim assumed that humans were selfish and in need of regulation. He posited that the group was the source of the regulation of the selfish drives and needs of the individual. Durkheim attended to both innate biological drives that needed to be regulated (e. g., sex drive) and to socially created needs that needed to be controlled (e. g., material success). In fact Durkheim suggest that the socially created needs were more difficult to control because they were potentially limitless. One can always want more money if making money becomes the end rather than the means to satisfy other needs.

Durkheim focused on one's attachment to social groups and their goals and the extent to which one was regulated by the collective conscience (Turner & Baughlay, 1981, p. 383). Attachment "involved the maintenance of interpersonal ties

and the perception that one is a part of a larger collectivity" and regulation "limited individual aspirations and needs, keeping them in check" (Turner & Margdaly, 1981, p. 253).

What was unique to Durkheim's sociological interpretation was that he saw rates of suicide as a social fact. Durkheim stated:

If...the suicides committed in a given society, during a given period of time are taken as a whole, it appears that this total is not simply a sum of independent units, a collective total, but is itself a new fact and genuine, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature—a nature, furthermore, demonstrably social. (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 42)

Conforming to Durkheim's definition, suicide has a reality apart from the individual (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 42). It is manifested as a collective tendency or, in Durkheim's terms, "sociological" impulse (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 212). According to Durkheim, the "sociological" impulse differs from one society or collectivity to another. Such impulses are the determining causes of suicide (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 212). Each society, according to Durkheim, is "predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths. This predisposition may therefore be the subject of a special study belonging to sociology" (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 51).

Durkheim developed a method of classifying the causes of suicide based on the nature of the individual's relations to the normative structuring of the collectivity in which he

is located (Parsons, 1949, pp. 311-312; Turner & Beeghly, 1980, p. 133). He proposed four categories of suicide: (1) egoistic, due to a weakening and loss of close spiritual ties to groups and collectivities; (2) anomic (normlessness), the result of deregulation of individual's desires and passions; (3) altruistic, the result of individuals' excessive integration into the group to an excessive that they commit suicide for the good of the group; and (4) fatalistic, the result of "excessive regulation, that of a person with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" (Durkheim, 1897/1981, p. 176; Weisstein, 1978, p. 17; Turner & Beeghly, 1981, pp. 132-133; Little, 1983, p. 143). These categories are based on the degree and nature of the integration of the individual into the social collectivity. "The degree of a person's integration into social life and the amount of regulation over his behavior were keys to understanding suicide rates" (Little, 1983, p. 143).

Egoistic suicide is the name given by Durkheim to suicide resulting from the lack of or poor social (family, religious, state) ties of the individual into groups or collectivities (Durkheim, 1897/1981, pp. 133-317; Weisstein, 1978). The individual "is not well integrated into the society and life has become meaningless" (Little, 1983, p. 143). Thus, suicide is reduced where individuals are closely integrated with their societies.

Burkheim also used religion to illustrate suicide. He observed that suicide rates vary by religious denomination (Burkheim, 1897/1951, pp. 155-176). Historically Catholic countries have a lower suicide rate than historically Protestant countries. The Catholic religion, according to Burkheim, has a stronger common conscience as well as a traditionally established, closely woven set of beliefs and rituals into which the life of the individual is well integrated (Burkheim, 1897/1951, pp. 155-176). Conversely, the Protestant church is less ritualistic and more individualistic. "The Protestant is far more the author of his faith" (Burkheim, 1897/1951, p. 156). As such, a high degree of individual responsibility emerges. The Catholic church emphasizes integrating its members into church relations and rituals that may buffer against suicide. Burkheim also observed that suicide rates of poor countries are lower than affluent ones; those not involved in a marital relationship tend to have a higher suicide rate than those married; the larger the family, the more "integrated" suicide rates were adversely affected by national crises and so on (Burkheim, 1897/1951, pp. 175-187; Little, 1988, p. 141). Suicide, according to Burkheim, varied inversely with the degree of social integration of the collectivity of which the individual formed a part (Burkheim, 1951, p. 188; Auer, 1987; Turner & Beeghly, 1981, pp. 152-156; Akers, 1985). "Burkheim therefore reasoned that if suicide rates

showed consistent patterns among social categories. "There must be social characteristics to explain the consistencies" (Littin, 1983, p. 141).

Altruistic suicide, due to excessive identification and integration, results from an extensive sense of duty to the society (Durkheim, 1893/1933, pp. 217-240). In other words, social integration is too strong and therein individual identification. "It is the group that is paramount, with individuals subordinating their interest to those of the group" (Turner & Meehley, 1981, pp. 154).

Social conditions favoring suicide arise "as the result of deregulation of individuals' desires and passions" (Turner & Meehley, 1981, p. 155). In a state of moral deregulation, the "society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a *spark-rele*" (Durkheim, 1893/1933, p. 258).

Suicide is an outgrowth of moral deregulation. Fatalistic suicide arises from the individual's excessive regulation (Durkheim, 1893/1933, p. 276). It is, according to Durkheim, "the suicide of very young husbands, of the married women who be childless" (Durkheim, 1893/1933, p. 276). It is also the suicide of slaves (Durkheim, 1893/1933, p. 274). However, "it has so little contemporary importance and examples are so hard to find aside from the cases just mentioned that" Durkheim does not deal with this type of suicide (Durkheim, 1893/1933, p. 274).

Other writers have attempted to categorize suicide. For example, Meltzbech (1933/1978) rejected Durkheim's typology of egoistic-suicidal suicides and anomic-suicidal suicides (Middens, 1988, p. 7). According to Meltzbech, the "social isolation" of the suicidal individual is the real cause of suicide (Middens, 1988, p. 7). Hence, one can expect suicide rates to be high in social environments (e.g., metropolitan centers) "providing the detachment of individuals from stable relationships with others" (Middens, 1988, p. 7).

Johnson (1988) agrees with Meltzbech that the "two variables of regulation and integration which Durkheim saw as independent social causes of suicide turn out to be just two labels for the same thing" (Johnson, 1988, p. 888). He rejects the theory's major problem, which, according to Johnson, arises out of Durkheim's proposition that the suicide rate depends on two variable social conditions i.e., social regulation and social integration (Johnson, 1988, p. 888). Although the two determine the incidence of suicide in any group, Durkheim claims however a group is both dimensions at once" (Johnson, 1988, p. 888).

Johnson regards equine (integration) and anomic (regulation) as one dimension instead of two. According to Johnson, equine and anomic are two different names for the same concept (Johnson, 1988, p. 888). "A well-integrated group is also well regulated, and even using Durkheim's own

concepts, anomie and egoism cannot be clearly distinguished" (Akron, 1968, p. 382) (Johnson, 1968, p. 888-89). Hence, according to Johnson, "Durkheim is left with 'only one cause' of suicide: lack of social integration" (Akron, 1968, p. 382). "The more integrated (regulated) a society, group, or social condition is, the lower its suicide rate" (Johnson, 1968, p. 888). Conversely, the less integrated/regulated a society, group, or social condition is, the higher its suicide rate. Such interpretations of Durkheim, which focus on social integration and anomie/suicide, have guided subsequent studies. Moreover, not all subsequent suicide studies have been guided by this "one cause" argument. Rather, they have maintained the types and different causes as defined by Durkheim. In these studies emphasis is placed on anomie/egoism and altruism/egoism as primary determinants of suicide. Both lines of reasoning have influenced research on black suicide, as we shall see in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

All modern American sociological theories and studies of suicide have been heavily influenced by Durkheim. However, neither Durkheim nor later theorists pay sufficient attention to black suicide. Are black suicides simply extensions of "fatalism" as Durkheim's noted reference to suicide and slavery would suggest? Is it integration and "regulation" in Durkheim's terms that keeps suicide and suicide risk low in the African-American community? Is the same explanation for suicide in modern society in general applicable to suicide among African Americans?

There are, at this stage no generally accepted answers and there has been a relative dearth of studies focused upon African-American suicides. This does not mean the issue has been totally ignored, but Durkheim's relative inattention to African-American suicide (or race variations in suicide) has been carried into modern literature on suicide. Before turning to a review of recent theory and research on African-American suicide, I will examine briefly the extent to which black suicide is lower than white suicide.

Differences in Black and White Suicide Rates

Suicide rates for African Americans have been consistently lower than white suicide rates for both sexes and all age categories, as shown in Table 1. Overall, the white suicide rate (11.3 per 100,000 in 1987) is about twice as high as the black rate (4.7 per 100,000 in 1987) as shown in Table 2. The suicide rates of whites are higher than those for blacks in every age group (see Table 1). For white males, suicide increases linearly with age (see Table 1). White female suicide rates are curvilinearly related to age. They increase up to the age of 74; thereafter they decrease (see Table 1). Conversely, black male rates decrease with age then increase slightly after age 44 (see Table 1). However, "there is some evidence that the rate actually increases among blacks up to the age of 34 and drops off sharply" (Blackwell, 1983, p. 314; Davis, 1980, pp. 223-224). Black female suicide rates decrease with age (see Table 1). Clearly, the highest suicide rate within the black population occurs among young adult males (Blackwell, 1983, p. 314; Davis, 1980, pp. 223-224). The suicide rate in 1984 among black males between ages 18 and 24 was 22.3 compared to 24.4 per 100,000 for white males in that age group. At no other age is the black suicide rate as close to the white suicide rate (see Table 1). U. S. Census Bureau reports suicide as the third leading cause of death

Table 1.1. Suicide Rates per 100,000 According to Sex, Race, and Age (1960-1994)

	1960	1965	1970	1980	1985	1994	1995	1996
WHITE MALE								
15-24 YRS.	8.4	8.8	13.8	20.4	20.4	22.6	22.7	22.4
25-34 YRS.	13.6	14.8	28.9	28.6	28.2	28.6	28.4	28.4
35-44 YRS.	22.4	21.8	35.3	33.6	33.3	32.7	32.5	32.5
45-54 YRS.	34.4	33.7	38.5	34.3	33.8	33.3	33.1	33.3
55-64 YRS.	42.9	40.3	38.5	36.8	37.4	38.8	38.7	38.7
65-74 YRS.	33.3	33.8	38.7	33.5	33.3	35.4	35.3	35.4
75-84 YRS.	41.3	39.7	48.5	36.5	36.5	33.5	37.4	38.8
85+	61.8	61.3	58.5	63.8	64.8	60.8	60.3	64.5
BLACK MALE								
15-24 YRS.	9.9	9.1	16.5	13.3	13.5	13.8	13.3	13.8
25-34 YRS.	8.3	22.4	28.5	31.8	28.7	26.7	28.4	27.3
35-44 YRS.	18.4	18.6	19.5	23.8	19.5	18.3	18.8	17.8
45-54 YRS.	28.4	26.8	27.8	18.6	19.7	21.8	22.5	22.5
55-64 YRS.	38.5	34.3	33.5	22.7	23.5	20.8	20.5	20.8
65-74 YRS.	38.5	23.3	31.7	28.7	23.4	23.8	23.8	26.4
75-84 YRS.	6.5	8.4	8.8	28.8	15.5	28.3	28.4	28.8
85+	8.3	8.8	10.8	28.8	23.7	21.3	21.7	27.5

Table 1—continued

	1959	1969	1979	1989	1993	1998	1999
WHITE PEOPLE							
18-24 yrs.	2.7	2.3	4.9	4.6	4.7	4.7	4.7
25-34 yrs.	6.2	5.9	9.8	7.3	6.4	6.4	6.3
35-44 yrs.	8.3	8.2	13.4	8.3	8.4	7.7	8.1
45-54 yrs.	10.5	10.8	13.3	10.3	10.3	9.5	9.6
55-64 yrs.	16.7	16.9	13.3	9.1	9.1	8.8	9.0
65-74 yrs.	20.4	17.8	9.6	7.0	7.6	7.5	7.7
75-84 yrs.	8.4	8.8	7.4	6.7	6.8	7.3	8.0
85+	8.8	6.2	6.1	5.3	5.1	4.7	4.9
BLACK PEOPLE							
18-24 yrs.	1.8	1.3	3.9	3.7	3.4	3.4	3.3
25-34 yrs.	2.8	2.6	6.7	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.8
35-44 yrs.	3.8	3.6	7.7	3.9	3.3	3.6	3.8
45-54 yrs.	3.8	3.3	3.7	3.8	3.3	3.8	3.8
55-64 yrs.	3.8	3.6	3.3	3.7	3.3	3.3	3.3
65-74 yrs.	1.8	2.2	3.9	1.3	2.9	2.6	2.8
75-84 yrs.	2.4	1.3	1.7	1.3	1.3	1.6	1.6
85+	2.4	-	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.6	-

Source: Regional Census for South Statistics: Vital Statistics of the United States, Vol. II, Mortality, Part B, 1989-98, Census Death Service, Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

among African-American males, ages 15 to 34, after homicides and accidents. This is also true for white male suicide rates in the same age group, but the suicide rate for white males continues to increase with age, while the black rate peaks in this age category (see Table 1).

Table 1: Suicide Rates per 100,000 According to Race and Sex (1970-1987)

Race and Sex	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987
TOTAL	21.8	21.8	21.3	21.3	21.5
Male	17.5	18.0	18.8	18.3	18.1
Female	8.8	8.8	8.3	8.1	8.7
WHITE	13.8	13.1	12.3	12.8	12.5
Male	10.8	10.5	9.9	10.8	10.1
Female	7.3	6.7	6.3	6.8	6.3
BLACK	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.5	4.7
Male	7.9	11.1	11.3	11.8	12.8
Female	2.8	3.8	3.3	3.4	3.8

Sources: Department of Health and Human Services, Statistical Series, annual data, 1970. Section H-21.1 National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States, Vol. 11, Mortality, Part 2, 1970-88. Public Health Service, Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Increases in African-American male suicides in the 1980s have been matched by increases in the white male rates. The white male rate of suicide averaged 3.8 times higher and white female rates averaged 3.3 times higher than African-American males and females (Department of Health and

Bureau Services, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984). Therefore, although there have been increases in black suicides in the past two decades, the African-American suicide rate is not approximating the white rate (see Table 2). The difference remains. Overall, the white suicide rate is nearly double the black suicide rate. It is this persistent difference that raises the question of interest here.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SUICIDE

As previously mentioned, there appears to be at least two ways of applying Durkheimian theory to black suicide. The first departs from the original two-dimensional, four-type theory of Durkheim and the second follows that original Durkheimian tradition more closely. The first concentrates on social integration and socialization or disorganization. The term *social* is used if taking a functionalist view (Merton, 1936; Glueck & Glueck, 1961) while social disorganization is used by the Chicago School (Cohen, 1988). These modern social theorists see deviance of all kinds, including suicide, as flowing from disjunctions in the opportunity structure in, or cultural goals and social structure of, society. Social disorganization theorists attribute deviance of all kinds to rapid social changes in American society which lead to weakened social norms or social control (Little, 1983, pp.

19-24]. In this view economic deprivation is typical of disorganizing. Therefore, higher rates of crime, mental illness, suicide, drug abuse, and other deviance should be highest in lower-class and disadvantaged groups and communities. However, neither approach adopts the stress social control assumption of Durkheim where the needs and wants of individuals have to be regulated by their social groups. Durkheim expects human selfishness to lead to crime and deviance unless it is controlled; it does not have to be specially motivated. In contrast, both the modern functionalist theories and the social disorganization approaches use social structural arrangements generating or motivating deviance that otherwise would not occur (see Gluek, 1961).

Modern crime theory proposes that disintegration or disorganization produces high rates of all forms of deviance, not just suicide. The social disorganization approach of the Chicago school expects high rates of deviance of all kinds including mental illness and depression.

Garas (1966) attributed suicide to the amount of social or personal disorganization experienced by the individual. "Suicide was explained by disorganization [i.e., powerlessness and hopelessness] in the community or in the life of the individual" (Garas, 1966, p. 189). Hence, black suicide rates should be high because racist and social

disorganization are believed to be pervasive in the black community. Merton's (1936) version of anomie theory proposed a means-ends theory to explain high rates of deviance. In this "strain" theory, lower-class and minority groups are denied equal opportunity to legitimate means in pursuing the "American dream" (Kane, 1985, p. 21; Little, 1983, pp. 16-17). Unable to achieve cultural goals of success, individuals turn to illegitimate, criminal, and delinquent means. According to Merton, then, communities, societies or racial groups are apt to be areas where the discrepancies between cultural ends and means are concentrated. For African Americans, a forced division of labor has reduced blacks to a lower-class status thereby creating conditions for a breakdown of norms or strain. As such, Merton's proposition should predict, depending on the adaptation, high rates of suicide among black Americans, as well as other forms of deviance (e.g., delinquency, crime, homicide, incarceration, and drug addiction).

Ogburn's (1966) version of anomie theory would argue that deviance is the result of status frustration or reaction to the inability to meet the demands of middle-class standards for those poor individuals who strive to do so. The goal is status, and the inability to meet these standards for attaining status produces a subculture where middle class values are inverted (a reaction formation) so that subcultural values are opposed to the

very middle class values which inspired them. Although Cohen's theory was applied specifically to delinquency subculture, it viewed the lower-class neighborhoods as anomie.

Similarly, Cloward and Ohlin (1961) ascribe higher rates of deviance in the lower-class subculture to an "opportunity structure." In other words, deviance is theorized to result from blocked opportunity and deprivation. Blocked legitimate opportunity structures produces strain-based deviance. Thus, the same conditions of anomie are felt to prevail and to produce high rates of all forms of deviance. However, like Durkheim (1897/1951, p. 143) and Henry and Stuart, Cloward and Ohlin distinguish between self-blame which results in deviance and blame of others (or alienation according to Cloward and Ohlin) where the anger and frustration are focused outward. From this perspective, deviance in the black community may be high since their population experiences overwhelming deprivation of economic, social and political means to cultural goals but outside may be low because blame is directed outward.

The literature on black suicide reflects this alienation and anomie theme. For instance, Clark (1965), Schultz (1968), Glasgow (1982) and Wilson and Agostini (1985) propose that the rapid deterioration of black institutions brought on by racial integration, assimilation, and urbanization has increased social disorganization and

systemed increased suicidal behavior among African Americans. Meltzer and Offer (1981) would agree, arguing that it is the competition for opportunities that exists between African Americans and their white counterparts that results in alienation and eventual suicide. The figures reported in Tables 1 and 2 support the argument that black rates have increased, but white rates have also increased.

The theories within this social/disorganization tradition (with the exception of Clelland and Chiles) would expect high rates of suicide and deviance among African Americans. While other deviance may be high in the black community, suicide is not. The question is why is there relatively little black suicide. If social theory is correct, there should be something counteracting the disorganization and strain factors in the black community. The hypothesis as elaborated in the first chapter is that the church provides an integrative narrative climate that differentially affects suicide versus other forms of deviance. Does a "buffering effect" exist? If so, the literature suggests that a key institution is providing it in the black church.

The second perspective on suicide follows more closely the original Durkheim theory of integration and regulation. Henry and Shuch (1984) proposed that "external restraints" contributed to high rates of outward aggression. "They accept the hypothesis that aggression is the inevitable

result of frustration and postulate that both homicide and suicide are aggressive products of frustration" (Liska, 1968, p. 144; see also Kohn, 1968, pp. 282-283). Henry and Stark begin with the question: "Why is there a tendency for people in some social categories (e.g., blacks) to have high homicide rates and low suicide rates while others (e.g., whites) have low homicide rates and high suicide rates?" (Liska, 1983, p. 144). The answer is that, when external restraint is strong frustration will produce aggression directed outward in violence toward others rather than oneself. Lower status (for lower class, minorities and women) means greater external restraint and thus lower suicide rates. Similarly Marie (1968) also explained suicide in terms of the lack of social integration and subordinate status, which he termed "external constraint." The more the external constraints, the lower the probability of suicide is.

Because of the division of labor, (in fact a "forced" division of labor results from *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination) black Americans have been relegated to a low status. Hence, aggression for blacks "in a racially stratified society is most likely to be directed outwardly than inwardly" (Liska, 1981, p. 147). Moreover since in this outward frustration/aggression more evident than in the black community where the "evidence includes the high

incidence of drug abuse, crime, black-on-black murder, imprisonment, and mental illness" (Kee, 1981, p. 284).

From this perspective, then, at least some structural aspects of economically and socially deprived communities would be seen as predictive of low rates of suicide. Rather than proposing that economic disadvantage was causal, Durkheim viewed poverty, itself, as regulative so long as it is viewed as just (Durkheim, 1893/1951, pp. 144-154, pp. 182-183). It "protects against suicide because it is a restraint in itself" (Durkheim, 1893/1951, p. 154).

If black poverty in the United States is a result, in large part, of past and present discrimination, then one needs to attend to the structure of the "forced" division of labor that created and sustains the impoverished conditions. Where groups are subjected to a forced division of labor, group solidarity (and regulation) does not match the organic solidarity that develops from a spontaneous (i.e., unenforced) division of labor premised on merit (Durkheim, 1913). The collective conscience, then, can be expected to survive among oppressed groups. If applied to the black community, one might look for indicators of mechanical solidarity that survive because of the forced division of labor. Is "mechanical solidarity the collective conscience in religion in contact and that integrates the individual into the collective" (Turner & Beeghly, 1981, pp. 187-188). Therefore, it is important to examine black religion to see

what it says about suicide. Turner and Beeghly argue that more elementary forms of social cohesion will stress more sacred and regional themes. The low black suicide rate may reflect a strong group consensus that condemns it universally. Turner and Beeghly suggest that religion is the place to find indicators of the collective conscience. Durkheim's empirical indicator of the collective conscience in The Division of Labor is law. But to the extent that the law is more "white" law, it may not be used to study black suiciding in conditions of a forced division of labor.

Durkheim clearly saw the function of religion in traditional, less differentiated society to insulate against *anomie*, which was the primary source of suicide in white European society of his day (Durkheim, 1897/1981, p. 134). However, Durkheim's theory of *anomie* was particularistic. It explained only suicide, not other forms of deviance and crime (Durkheim, 1897/1981, p. 134). In fact, Durkheim argued that, depending on the type of suicide, where suicide is high homicide may be low because they arise from antagonistic causes (Durkheim, 1897/1981, p. 134). Durkheim was also clear that the prophylactic effect of religion's counteracting of *anomie* was not due to the content of beliefs about the value of life or the prospects of condemnation but came to the social integration religion fosters (Durkheim, 1897/1981, p. 132).

The forced division of labor provides another avenue for extending Durkheim to black suicide. The kind of over control and regulation of present day forced division of labor has elements of what Durkheim briefly referred to as fatalism. However, Durkheim (1913) suggests that when over control results from a forced division of labor, the oppressed can be expected to strike back at their oppressors where subjugation is used. In such circumstances, suicide might be low (depending on the collective conscience) and other deviance high. Durkheim was an overall fanboy toward all forms of deviance where there is a forced division of labor and fatalism (Durkheim, 1907/1966, pp. 129-144).

Durkheim devotes only a footnote to fatalistic suicide, but others who have maintained suicide theory closely in tune with the original Durkheimian theory tend to view black suicide as instances of fatalistic suicide (Broad, 1973). It is not clear whether this interpretation would expect fatalism to be high enough to predict high rates of black suicide, but if so, the church could counter fatalism as the loss of hope by offering a philosophy of hope...

An investigation of the role of religion in suicide in the black community would be in order whether one takes the first perspective on suicide and disorganization or the second one maintaining the Durkheimian typology of suicides. However, the literature on black suicide that proposes that

the church's influence is an important factor in low suicide rates among blacks follows more the assimilation/dissimilation perspective outlined above. In this literature, the place of blacks in American society is viewed as second. Segregation and unequal opportunities place strain and stress in the black community that should produce high rates of all forms of deviance. That there is less suicide than expected in the African-American community is accounted for by reference to the church and other institutions providing internal integration and buffers against suicide.

It is this literature that forms the specific theoretical framework for this study, and the hypothesis from that literature of the protective or buffering effects of the church which is the focus of this study, to which I turn now. However, as I have shown, there is at least one other way of viewing the issue which could also guide research on black suicide and could lead to paying attention to the role of the black church.

Religion as a Suicide Buffer in the African American

Since the pioneering work of C. Fradette, "The Problem of Suicide in the American Negro" in 1918 there have been few empirical studies of black suicide. Most modern literature there has been tends to begin with the idea that blacks who commit suicide are overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and "oppressive discipline" (Davis, 1980, pp.

198-199; Little, 1983, p. 141; Gluba, 1988, p. 173; Mann, 1991, p. 293). "The experiences of deprivation, powerlessness, alienation and anomie have failed to the individual level to understand, interpret and control" (Mann, 1991, p. 292). Anomie, in the modern sense of disjunction between goals and means, or social disorganization, is viewed as high among African Americans in the United States. All of the indices usually used as indicators of social disorganization (e.g., broken homes, high illegitimacy rate, drug abuse, unemployment) and the supposed consequences of drug abuse, crime, and delinquency characterize the Black community. From this perspective it is reasonable to pose the following question: Why do African Americans have a low rate of suicide in the face of a high rate of social disorganization?

The answer given is that alienation and anomie do not result in high suicide rates because there are features of the Black community that buffer or "protect" against suicide, such as strong religious beliefs and extended family. Killingsley (1981), Stark (1974), Allen (1978), Martin and Martin (1978) and Mokuau (1981) all lack at feature such as the family, church, social organizations, schools, and social support systems that they believe protects African Americans from suicide.

This view is further supported by Butler (1980), who used the term "protective factors" to describe the

relationship between the aforementioned institutions and African-American suicide. The studies propose, as Davis (1980), that "the likelihood of suicide is increased without important support systems." Johnson (1980) proposed that suicide rates are relatively low among blacks compared to their white counterparts because social ties are stronger. Woodford (1980) and King (1974) propose that experiences with urbanization, integration, and racism have helped to insulated African Americans from suicide by producing adaptability. Davis (1980) proposes that suicide among African Americans is "likely to occur under conditions of weakened relations, i.e., increasing an weakening of communal and family ties." However, Davis also offers the buffering hypothesis:

For blacks, the stresses and anxieties that might lead to suicide have often been offset by strong family and communal ties. Effectively denied all other mechanisms to compensate for rejection and abuse, blacks have in the past used their families, communities, and institutions (i.e., churches, social clubs, fraternal organizations, etc.) to develop positive and functional forms of response to extremely stressful social situations. The black community, in effect, has functioned as a protective society, providing participation and purpose, a sense of belonging, and the possibility of cooperative and self-help approaches to problems. (Davis, 1980, p. 128)

The hypothesis in the literature is that social forces buffering against suicide are especially to be found in the values and norms of the church and family in the

African-American community. Although there have been recent changes, the African-American family historically has shown amazing resiliency under very stressful and debilitating conditions (Wilson, 1980). Strong family ties and traditions have persevered through the separation, disruption, and disorganization of slavery, mass adoption, mother-only families, economic deprivation, and economic social changes. Religion and the church as an institution also have traditionally played a unifying and leadership role in the African-American community.

There has been little empirical research, however, on how well this approach actually accounts for lower Black suicide. Lewis (1986) refers specifically to the paucity of empirical studies designed to evaluate theories about the cause of African American suicide or the reasons why the rate is lower than the white suicide rate. This study is meant to fill some of that empirical gap. It is believed to be the first empirical investigation into the suicide-buffering role of religion in the Black community.

The working hypothesis investigated is that the church is an important source of social integration and norms for African Americans that act as buffers or mechanisms that contribute to the low suicide rate. This is not to say that such resources do not exist or are insufficiently present in the white community. There is no intent at this time to

make systematic comparisons of African Americans and their white counterparts in this regard.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which the norms and so social processes do exist in the African-American community that are consistent with the buffering hypothesis. To propose a buffering effect from the church in the black community seems intuitive and sociological sense. As we have seen it has been stated in one form or another in previous literature, but there has been no empirical research specifically focused upon it. Therefore, I treat it as a working hypothesis to facilitate the exploration of the possible relationship of the black church to lower black suicide. The research here does not allow for a precise testing of hypotheses or definitive acceptance or rejection of them. It does serve as a starting point, to be modified as the research progresses, to provide the basis for future research. Is there an identifiable set of religiously based beliefs about suicide that would appear to buffer against suicide among African Americans? If so, what are they? Why do they seem to be preventive of suicide but not other forms of deviance? This research identifies what these views may be.

Church leaders within the African-American community, big and large, are local residents. They generally have been involved as religious, moral, and social leaders. Although many of the African-American church leaders are not college

educated or seminary trained and are not affiliated with national religious groups, they still occupy positions of respect in the local community. This isolation adds to the community-oriented nature of the African-American churches, as well as to their involvement in political and social movements. Again, this is not to say that the church is unimportant in the white community; but in the local African-American community it was, and largely remains, the single most important social institution. By fulfilling multiple functions, it has been an integrating and unifying institution around which even the nonreligious rally. This has been true in the Christian religions that dominate, but it also applies to a large extent to newer churches such as the Black Muslim. Most churches within the African-American community come from within the community itself. African Americans essentially form their own churches. African-American churches are for the most part indigenous neighborhood churches that support each other and the family and help to unify social bonds within the community.

The state of knowledge in this area of research is still very much in the exploratory stage. We need to establish whether or not such socializing factors seem to be operating. This research focuses on at least one aspect of the black community that may contribute against suicide, a community, narrative climate into which individuals are socialized through the church and family that is essentially

anti-suicide or that provides a social support of suicide as
repugnant and perhaps even undesirable.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

This is a study of the African-American church to see if its values and social relationships are such that they can reasonably be related to the low suicide rate in the black community. In a real sense this is a study of the social meaning of suicide in that community. This includes the norms, values, and stigmas relating to suicide. The social meaning of suicide is reflected in the ways people talk about it and in how they respond to suicide and suicide attempts. Is there an identifiable set of religiously based beliefs about suicide which buffer against suicide among African Americans?

This study is primarily a qualitative/ethnographic one drawing upon interviews with leaders of the religious community and also upon the researcher's experience as a participant observer in the religious life of the African-American community. The study focuses on the church and church people as knowledgeable informants who could provide information and insight on the social meaning of suicide and attempted suicide and the response of churches in the African-American community.

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

The researcher is an accepted member and active participant in the black community located in Gainesville, Florida. Participation and integration into the religious life of the black community provided the researcher access to the shared symbols, language and common understandings. The specific methods utilized to collect data for this study consisted of:

- (1) face-to-face interviews with pastors which included
 - (a) general questions about views of suicide and
 - (b) vignettes to allow comparison of views of suicide with other behavior such as crime and drug abuse and
- (2) a questionnaire survey administered to church members.

The interviews and questionnaire questions were designed to elicit attitudes, opinions, beliefs and feelings of African Americans toward suicide and how they have or would (if the occasion were to arise) respond to attempted suicides and to the families in which suicide has occurred. The goal of the interviews and questionnaire procedures was to examine the extent to which there are coded processes and norms in the black community that act to foster lower suicide rates.

Interviews with Pastors

The researcher's acceptance in the religious life of the African-american community was of great value but did not guarantee success in gaining cooperation. In order to secure rapport with and the confidence of persons to be interviewed, considerable thought was given to the approach to be used. The success of the approach was manifested by the number of people that cooperated with the study.

Several criteria were utilized in making the approach:

- (1) The interview wasn't attempted unless the person being interviewed had time to complete the interview without any unusual interruptions.
- (2) The interview was private and confidential so as to encourage truthful answers.
- (3) The individuals being interviewed were told why the information was wanted and how it will be used.

A letter of introduction (see Appendix A) together with a brief explanation of the study (see Appendix B) was mailed to church pastors. A follow-up phone call was made to confirm receipt of the letter and appointment scheduling.

In order to determine the number of black churches in the city of Gainesville the researcher contacted the Mayor's office. The Mayor's office directed the researcher to city's Affirmative Action office for a computerized list of all black churches and pastors in the Gainesville, Florida

area. The list contained thirty-seven churches. The attempt was made to contact and set up interviews with the pastors of all of the churches, as well as other leaders (associate pastors, elders, deacons, etc.) within each church. However, a decision was made early in the research to interview just the pastors. This was done because there were too many church leaders (e.g., deacons) to make interviews with all of them feasible.

All thirty-seven churches were notified by letter and later by a follow-up phone call. Except for conflicting schedules, there were no unusual problems in arranging the interviews. Of the thirty-seven churches asked to participate in the study, thirty responded favorably and seven declined. Church memberships ranged from forty-five to well over two hundred. As such, the churches were divided into three groups for purposes of distributing the questionnaires: small church group (less than 100 members); medium church group (more than 100 but less than 200 members); and large church group (over 200 members).

The pastors were interviewed as informants and not respondents. That is, I was less interested in their individual attitudes and characteristics and relied on them more as persons strategically located in the community to provide information, insight, and contacts within that community. As I will show in Chapter 5, the church is believed to be central to the African-American community.

church leaders within the African-American community are the individuals that have the most contact with families and know what's going on within the African-American community.

Conducting the interviews for this study was a draw-out and tedious process which began in July and ended in November. Initially, the researcher intended to do as many as three interviews a week. However, the researcher found it difficult to meet a one interview per week schedule. This occurred primarily because twenty-six of the thirty pastors were part-time or "weekend" pastors and had forty hour-a-week jobs in addition to their pastorate. Hence, interviews for these pastors could only be scheduled around their respective work hours. In some cases the researcher reported to job sites to conduct interviews. Only four churches had congregations and budgets large enough to employ a full-time salaried pastor. These interviews were easily facilitated, as the pastors had regularly scheduled office hours. The bulk of the interviews were conducted Wednesday through Friday mornings. Other interviews were conducted on Sundays. These interviews required the researcher to attend church services which sometimes lasted for hours. For the most part, pastors were cooperative in making their appointments and keeping with the interviewer schedules.

Interviews (see Appendix C) were approximately one to one-and-a-half hours in length. Some interviews, however,

exceeded three hours because of the depth to which some pastors went in their responses and occasional interruptions (i.e., phone calls, visits by congregants and inclement weather). Interviews were conducted in the pastors' offices of the medium and large size churches. Small church interviews were conducted within their sanctuaries. Only four interviews were conducted within pastors' homes.

The nature of this topic made it important for the interviews to be conducted skillfully and sensitively. It was important that the respondent feel comfortable in the situation and trust the researcher. Interviews were the major instrument for getting information on the African-American church and its role in suicide buffering. The researcher's interviewing technique was loosely structured and unscripted. This gave the pastors latitude to develop their thinking. The first part of the interviews with the pastors focused on four main areas:

- (1) The pastor's religious and normative views toward suicide.
- (2) The pastor's assessment of the role of the church and religion in the African-American family and community.
- (3) To what extent the pastor teaches and practices suicide-relevant norms in his church.
- (4) Information about the pastors' view of the causes and prevention of suicide and suicide attempts in the African-American community.

These were addressed on general issues and then followed up with several vignettes related to suicide and other deviant behavior (see Appendix B, D, F, and G) to which the pastors were asked to respond. The researcher read each of the vignettes to the pastors. Each vignette was succeeded by four to seven follow-up questions which were designed to elicit the pastors' opinions and attitudes about several issues related to the nature of suicide and life-threatening behavior such as drug abuse and violence. The idea was to provide the pastors with four different scenarios in order to examine suicide and other life-threatening behavior and how perceived role that the black church and family play or could play in dealing with these social issues. The nature of the vignettes provided the researcher with something against which suicide attitudes could be compared, i.e., different views held of suicide versus violence and other life-threatening behavior in the black community. The vignettes allowed for the expressed views on suicide by the church leaders to be contrasted with views of crime, which could be life-threatening to others, and drug abuse, which could be life-threatening to oneself. The idea was to discover, if possible, what it could be about the influence of the church which seemed to counter suicide proneness toward suicide but not toward violence or drugs.

Survey of Church Members

A short survey (see Appendix B) was given directly to church members. Six churches were selected for the survey: 2 small churches (less than 100 members), 2 medium churches (more than 100 but less than 200 members), and 2 larger churches (over 200 members). The survey was meant to judge to what extent the views of the pastor have been transmitted to and are shared by the congregation. The survey data were also used to substantiate and partially validate information from the interviews with pastors about what the prevailing attitudes are.

Most of the surveys were conducted during the church service, but not before the researcher had actively participated in the worship services. For example, the researcher was asked to help raise the offering and "bless the collection" at one church. Another time, the researcher was asked to give testimony or "witness." Overall, the researcher participated in and attended at least twenty Sunday and Family Day services, building fund campaigns, and worship services. This active involvement in the ongoing religious life of the community both provided support and credibility needed for cooperation and provided the researcher with additional insights into that life.

The survey process was just as draw-out as the interview process. This was due, in part, to the absence of

organization and "laid back nature" of church attendance. For example, the researcher would show up in the morning for 9:00 a.m. Sunday school and be the only person waiting in the sanctuary until 10:00 a.m. At which time members would trickle in and sing a hymn until pastors showed up for the 11:00 a.m. service. Scheduled services never seemed to begin on time. Inclement weather, i.e., rain and cold temperatures, almost always kept attendance low. Despite the obstacles, the usual approach within the churches selected was to survey all adults in and older present on the day of the questionnaire's administration.

Church pastors were asked to announce to their congregations that a study of suicide and other life-threatening behaviour such as drug abuse in the African-American community is being conducted in the Gainesville area and to introduce the researcher. The researcher introduced the surveys, provided instruction, and gave a comment notice (see Appendix I) from the pulpit to the congregation while church members distributed packets and the short surveys to members in complete. Surveys were approximately one hour in length. Surveys instruments and packets were collected by pastors and given to the researcher following worship services.

Congregations were asked about their religious beliefs as well as the perceived attitude of their respective churches toward suicide. Finally, congregations were asked

about their handling or/and knowledge of suicides or attempted suicides within their family, church and community.

Data Analysis

Qualitatively the interviews with African-American pastors were used primarily to give the researcher information assessing the extent to which the churches and values present an ameliorating effect on African-American suicide. It was hoped that the aforementioned interviews would also lead the researcher to facilities where suicides or attempted suicides had occurred. This did not occur. Not one pastor had knowledge of a family where a suicide or attempted suicide had occurred within his or her congregation. Given the low incidence of suicide, this is not surprising, but it did leave the researcher with little to say about social reactions to suicide beyond how persons would respond if confronted with situations in the vignettes.

Once interviews with pastors had been conducted and surveys completed, the researcher could decide whether or not they were consistent under the working hypothesis. Are the values, norms, beliefs, and social relations such that they can plausibly be seen as acting as an amelioration of suicide and a buffer against suicide in a way that they do not buffer against other forms of deviance? The data from

the surveys will be used more descriptively rather than inferentially. That is, the study will not do such in the way of analyzing socio-demographic or other variables accounting for differing opinions and attitudes among the people in the study with bi-variate or multi-variate statistics. The focus will be on using the responses to describe the distribution of African-Americans' views and reactions on suicide to see if they tend toward consistency or lack of consistency with findings from the interviews.

Reliability, validity, and limitations

Ethnographic reliability focuses on the data-gathering technique and consistency with assuming that if the study were conducted by someone else in a similar manner similar findings would be obtained. Ethnographic validity refers to the degree to which participant observation and interview techniques achieve what they purport to discover, i.e., an accurate representation of what is occurring within the social situation or system being studied (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, pp. 31-40; Plummer, 1983, p. 101). In this qualitative study which involves interviews, validity is concerned with the researcher's understanding of the meanings of the observed socio-cultural experience. Hence, response validity is based on prolonged involvement in the

observed failure, i.e., that African-American community, and the credibility of the researcher to the informants.

The Consistency or Lack of Consistency
in the Interviews and Surveys

A limitation of this study was the self-selected or voluntary nature of the population both with regard to the interview informants and survey respondents. Thus the researcher concluded with was essentially a voluntary self-selected sample. Not everyone wanted to deal with this researcher. Hence, the sampling procedure of this study was based upon the self-selecting nature of the number of people that communicated with the researcher. The high illiteracy rate among African Americans in the community effected the way in which the researcher gathered the data.

Consequently, the motive to use interviews as the major instrument for getting information as opposed to questionnaires became evident. Precautions were taken by the researcher to insure that the instructions might be understood and that no actions or leading questions on the researcher's part influenced the opinion of the person being interviewed and surveyed. Every effort was made to encourage sincere responses.

These limitations do not preclude a set of data from the interviews and surveys which should provide sufficiently clear basis for tentative conclusions about the sociology

integrative, suicide buffering processes operating in at least a significant portion of the African-American community. This is theory-guided research which goes beyond what is currently available in the literature and should provide the basis for further testing of the tentative conclusions.

CHAPTER 5
INTERVIEW FINDINGS: GENERAL ATTITUDES,
RELIGION, AND VALUES REGARDING SUICIDE

Introduction

Recall that the intent of this study is to investigate the social meaning of suicide in the black community. In particular, the study is of the possible role of norms and social relations of the church in promoting, constructing and reinforcing a particular social meaning in the black community which may act as a counter or buffer against a higher prevalence of suicide that might be expected from the same social factors involved in other forms of deviance such as crime and drugs. The literature suggests that the church and its interaction with the family have been a major influence in the low rates of suicide among African Americans, but there has been no direct empirical investigation of this. The study is not able to provide a definitive answer to the question of how important religion has been in keeping the black suicide prevalence low and no systematic comparison with the white community or religious groups is made. The study does allow a basis for at least tentative conclusions about the empirical reality of a religiously based narrative climate or set of social

beliefs and expectations in the black community which define suicide as beyond the pale, as especially unacceptable or unthinkable for blacks.

The social meaning of suicide includes the norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs relating to suicide that appear to prevail in the black community as revealed in the teachings about and responses to suicide and suicide attempts in "the religious community." The church is a strategic place to explore the social meaning of suicide in the black community because of the historical centrality of the institution of religion and its relation to the family and social life in that community.

If the influence of the church is pervasive, then the moral and social views promulgated by the church leaders and adhered to by the active church participants should be influential in the views of the black community including those on suicide. The pastors interviewed were not only to relate their own opinions, but also to address directly the issue of suicide in the black community as compared to other deviant acts such as drug abuse and crime. To reiterate, the interviews were loosely structured to concentrate on (1) religious and normative views toward suicide; (2) the role of the black family in religion and religion in the black family and wider community; (3) the extent to which suicide-relevant norms and attitudes are transmitted in church; and

(4) the view of the causes of and prevention of suicide and suicide attempts in the black community.

The findings and conclusions from the pastors' responses to questions in these four areas will be presented in this chapter, but not in the order or with the headings listed above. Rather, I will first address the issue of the central place of the church in the black community and then its unity with the family. Then, I will present findings in the other three areas and point out that the views transmitted by the pastors reveal a deep sense of the incompatibility of the black experience with suicide.

As we shall see later there is a uniformity and consensus among these informants. While it was not possible to assess how thoroughly this consensus is shared throughout the community, a sample of the church participants (presented in Chapter V) was surveyed to judge the extent to which they share the pastors' views.

The Centrality of the Church in the African- American Community

The church has played a major role in the African-American experience. The church has "traditionally been the central node around which the rest of the community revolved" (Hicks, 1988, p. 152). For African Americans, the church "has served as a refuge for blacks from racial discrimination and social oppression," as well as the

conferrer of status, center of organization and the center of protest (Cobb, 1988, p. 322; Staples, 1978). The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was largely church led and today major community and national black leaders remain heavily represented by those who were identified with the Civil Rights Movement such as Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Representative Walter Rosten, Dr. Joseph Lowery, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and former United Nations Ambassador, Andrew Young. C. Eric Lincoln (1974) perceptively and vividly described the unique place of the church in the black community:

The Church is the spiritual face of the Black community, and whether one is a "church member" or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black Church, because of the peculiar nature of the Black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of that experience, the time was when the personal dignity of the black individual was communicated almost entirely through his church affiliation. The Black Church, then, is in some sense a "universal church," claiming and representing all Blacks out of a long tradition that looks back to the time when there was only the Black Church to bear witness to "who" or "what" a man was as he stood at the bar of his community. The Church still accepts a broad-range responsibility for the Black community inside and outside the formal communion. "The Church" is still in an important sense "the people," and the Church leaders are still the people's representatives. (p. 118)

Reagin (1989) adds further:

After the civil War, churches played an important role in black communities-- churches were social-aid societies, substituting for those lacking sickness and death, and they played a role in the grooming of economic pioneers. Education often came as religious education. New schools were

established after the war, many under religious auspices, and some trained ministers as black leaders. Black churches continued as community and schooling centers, since few such centers were provided by local or state governments. (p. 248)

As Lincoln and others have long recognized, church leaders in the African-American community have not been religious people only. By and large, they have also been social, racial, and political leaders as well. Therefore, values, norms, attitudes and beliefs concerning suicide of African Americans in general, and not just those actively involved in church, have their origin in the church.

If the church is to provide social integration and moral values counter to suicide that pervade the African-American community in Gainesville, it needs to have this overarching role that goes beyond the religiously active. This study cannot demonstrate that the majority of black citizens in and around Gainesville recognize this role for the church. However, the church leaders interviewed in this study were and support Lincoln's and others' view of the church as an institution with unifying and leadership roles in the black community. They point to the black church as an institution which has provided social and cultural integration for black Americans, and has interacted with the black family to provide resiliency under stressful conditions.

[interview #101010] The church has played a major role because it has been the bible of the black community from slavery time to now. The thing that has held us together has been the

church and prayer. The church has been the social hall. It's been the place of contact. It's been the place to share the meeting of the minds take place. I see the outside race very low in our community compared to others because of the role that the church has played. It has helped minds understood. It has built self-esteem. It has helped educate them as to what would happen and the result of religion. The belief of heaven and hell really existed. The facts of eternity. The facts of lost people and saved people. I think that the part that the church has played in training, developing and creating the minds of our young people has been a vital part of really holding the community together.

[Interview CHENKINS] I think religion is the greatest export of the black community. It's the greatest thing going. When you come to religion you are equal. The church is the black person's life. That's where most of everything is taken care of anyway. Our politics are taken care of at church. That's when we decide who to vote for. In education, the pastor tells you to get back in school. In economic bills are even discussed with the pastor. Religion is the fiber of our community. If we lose that, we're gone. It is what's holding us together.

Another pastor agrees and emphasizes that the church fulfills social as well as religious functions. Bringing together is the church institution activities and community participation that spread out among several organizations operating in the white community.

[Interview FRIEDMAN] Well, first of all, the black church is our only communication. The black people have nothing else. They don't have any family clubs. They don't have any decent recreational facilities. Ah....they don't have any Japanese or business clubs. Whereas, the white community has all kinds of clubs where they can express themselves and let off their steam. The black people only have the church.

Another pastor explains the same view and emphasizes the importance of the church as a refuge, as a problem solver and interpreter in the face of difficulty.

[Interview 0518004] We don't own anything. We don't produce anything. They have it all. The only thing we have is the church. It has been our only refuge in times of storm...in times of struggle...it's all we have. The Word through the church...ah...I believe has kept us from destroying ourselves. The church tells us to live life and weather out the storm. Brighter days are ahead and coming. We are the heartbeat of each family. The black church historically has been the life blood of the black people.

Historically, the church has acted as the political, social, religious and moral voice of the black community. This multiple function of the church, together with its interplay with the family, support the idea that "the Church" is in an important sense "the people" (Lincoln, 1974, p. 114). The nature of this relationship helps to unify social bonds within the black community.

The power of the black church in the black community is embedded in the "nature of the black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of that experience" (Lincoln, 1974, p. 118). African Americans possess a social and religious way of life that provides individuals with group acceptance and support and a method for discharging stress. The church affects not only the life of its active members but the life of the larger black community.

Among black Americans religion by itself is cited as the factor that most influences their life style, as well as their sociopolitical and cultural behavior. Religion is the most observable aspect of the African-American's life. Religion permeates black society and is an integral part of the community more clearly than it is in the white society. Staples (1978) describes religion as representing black Americans' social reality.

Religious worship brings about the sharing of beliefs and practices by a group with a common history and a shared destiny. The religious experiences in black churches serve the purpose of giving strength, identity and a reason for being to the members. It provides a structured world view and a system of defenses and attack in a basically hostile environment. [Staples, 1978, pp. 188-189]

Theologian and Professor Guyraud S. Wilmore adds further:

Black Religion has always concerned itself with the dualization of an unceasingly religious people with the mystery of God, but it has been equally concerned with the pressing of a designed and subjugated people for freedom--freedom from the religious, economic, social, and political domination that whites have exercised over blacks since the beginning of the African slave trade. [Wilmore, 1983, pp. ix-x]

As Staples and Wilmore have recognized, it is through religious participation that morals, ethics, self-definition, and cultural traditions are expressed. Attitudes, values, and patterns of social organization are also learned. In a real sense, then, black Americans are a religious people. This notion is an ingrained into the fabric of black Americans that it has remained in

developing a collective consciousness, with regard to many aspects of life, among black Americans. Religious participation and devotion serve to enhance the quality of life both in this world and in the world to come after death. This belief in the black community allows individuals to "achieve relief from their oppressed condition" (Steples, 1994, p. 128). Given the centrality of the church and the importance of religion in the black community, it is reasonable to expect that the views of suicide held by the religious leaders will have an effect on views of suicide and suicidal behavior in that community.

The Black Church and the Black Family

For both white and black Americans the church and family are intertwined. Yet there is the view in the African-American community that, the family and church are especially integrated as a unit responsible for addressing the social, economic, and political needs and problems of its members. Perhaps not uniquely, but in a special way, the family and church are the primary twin pillars of black American society. This is seen as a historical and traditional extension of African culture, as well as the African slave experience in the United States. The extended family has been a significant element in both the survival and advancement of black Americans. Getting together for religious services was one of the few reasons slaves were

allowed to coagulate. Hence, the influence of the extended family has provided conditions within which primary socialization and the influence of religion has occurred. This feature of black families has made the family both the primary socialization and learning unit for black Americans and resilient to the socio-economic conditions of poverty, unemployment and scarce economic resources (Black, 1974, p. 184).

No separate data or analysis of the black family was done in this study. However, given the close tie between the religious and family institutions the informants were asked about the church and the black family. The black family is seen as standing more alone as the primary socializer, while white families tend to have other avenues in which socialization can occur. For black families, religious participation through the church is essential in promoting individual and communal growth and development. For some the black family is seen as somehow a more effective socializer and haven of support against stress that may result in such things as suicide.

[Interview STP71801] The Afro-American family was structured so that we were taught by watching parents in terms of how they handled their stresses and pressures. We were taught that there is a better way out than doing suicide; finding someone to help. The white family structure has never been and never will be as strong as the Afro-American structure. There was things within the Afro-American family structure that we were taught in terms of respect. In terms of knowing to seek those who were older than you. In terms of just being who you were, but staying in your

place until such time as you were ready to handle such pressures and stresses. On the other hand, whites have allowed their children not to be children and brought up their boy, but to somewhat fit right into the mainstream of being where the adults they thought they were old enough to understand all of the ramifications of life which no child or teenager can understand. These were things that were kept from us. We were asked to stay in our places and that has helped us not to reach out and grab for the world as fast and become bogged down with these pressures and stresses as whites have. That's why I feel that racism rates among Afro-Americans is just not as great.

The church is portrayed as an extension of the family. Indeed, the prevailing attitude of the pastors in this study is that the church and the family are one unit. "The church is our mother, shield and our only hope" (interview 00149000). The role of the church is to promote the social, educational, occupational and political aspirations of the black community and the family is so intertwined in this that it is hard to separate where one ends and the other begins. In the words of one pastor:

[interview 00000001] The black family and religion are one in the same. The role of religion in the black community is to give meaning, purpose, and direction to our lives. This is why you find blacks gathered at the black church where the gospel is preached, prayer is made, and scripture is taught. You will find answers there.

Pastors interviewed in this study have gone through great lengths to articulate their views as to how the church plays a role in the black family. According to the pastors, the church acts as the intermediary between the family and the community. "The role of the black church is to keep the

family together. The church is also there to educate, inform and help as much as possible. That has always been the role of the black church throughout the ages" (Interview ST145001). Because the family and church are seen as one entity, the church sets the standards out of which the family is to function within the community. In the words of a pastor the black church "wants to keep the black family in a group. All of the families become one big family. The church wants to keep the families unified and bonded" (Interview ST145001). One pastor expands on this theme and ties it into containment of violence which he refers to as "self-murder."

[Interview ST145001] We are interwoven, as to speak, into each family. We consider ourselves a family. That's all I know is family. I preach that when you join the church you join the family of God and we look upon one another as family. So what we do to keep that family alive is come to one another's houses at all times. I quote that's what makes our families so strong. We don't just meet on Sundays like the white churches. We are the life blood, as to speak, of the black family-our families can always come to us and not be ashamed to come to the church for help, prayer or strength. We try to keep a family atmosphere- I guess we could say that this probably keeps our people in line. Especially when it comes to self-murder. We have such an outreach in our community that we always are in touch with our people. When you have somebody that cares about you like we do you don't have to give up on anything. We are one big family.

Other informants also stressed the unity of family and church. They add that the emotional and spiritual needs of its members are met by the church which serves to educate

and inform its members in a way that strengthens the family. This view is articulated in a number of ways:

[Interview 87128043] We say so many times truthfully that we are one big happy family. But we also know that in families there are problems. And yes, we are one big happy family here, but we do have our problems. We have been able to work those problems out in a way that it avoids those places that have been broken and it makes strong who we are as a people. The church is that institution which is able to keep a family together. It strengthens our relationships. It helps us learn to communicate and it does that no other institution can do. The church does...the church has been...the church will always be the only institution that has been a life saving force in the black families whole setup.

[Interview 80188034] We are the family. as we see the family, we are the body of Christ. The family is the church and that's how we see that.

[Interview 87148022] The Bible tells us what our role is to our families. That is where we go to deal with our families. We believe in the word of God and are obedient to it. The role of the church is to keep the family together. The church is also there to educate, inform, and help as much as possible. That has always been the role of the black church throughout the ages. That's what has kept our people together.

[Interview 88186003] There is a statement that I love. The church is all we have and the church is all we need. The church is a family. We treat each other like a family. I said to my wife this morning, 'I want our church to be the kind of church that a person that's not loved can be loved in.' Our church is family.

In the portage view, the church has shaped the black family. This is in agreement with the view in the literature that the church is firmly established in a central role in the black community. The church has been and continues to be the primary socialiser, organiser,

communicator, educator and liberator of the black family. This "universal" nature and function of the church serves to provide values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs essential in countering suicide in the black community. Further, the social integrative effect of the church, which has been articulated in the interview, supports the notion that the church and the family are in a sense one entity.

Views of Suicide in the Black Church

Establishing the significance of the church in the community does not guarantee that these views on suicide are widely spread in black culture. However, such significance is a necessary condition for the pervasiveness of these views and the qualitative evidence in the study and from the literature establishes that the condition does exist. Therefore, a central objective in the study was to get the pastors to express these views on the ground that such views are not confined to the pastors' own personal views. These views appear to fill the hypothesis that religious norms shared in the black community do counter suicide. They condemn suicide and define it as so alien to the black experience that not even contemplating suicide is implicit in what it means to be African American.

The Church's Conception of Suicide

The first aspect of suicide explored in the interviews was the pastors' conception of what constitutes suicide. While Burkhead defined suicide as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (Burkhead, 1981, p. 44). This view is consistent with those expressed in the interviews. The concept of suicide is considered to be "willful, premeditated and not in accord with a sound judgment." The prevailing definition of suicide within the community is that suicide is a "voluntary act whereby a person takes his or her own life." Although the views of the pastors jibe with those of Burkhead, there is a tendency to expand upon the definition to include other forms of self-injurious behavior such as alcohol and drug use/abuse and "hanging out on the streets." Several pastors believed that there was a causal relationship between alcohol and drug use/abuse and suicide. The clearest form of suicide, taking deliberate and immediate action to end one's life, is most condemned. However, the concept of suicide that some of the pastors held expanded in to refer also to self-injurious behavior such as drug use which could be a less clearly deliberate form of suicide. This attitude is evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

[Interview 88117087] Substance Abuse is a form of suicide. It might be a slower form of suicide, but it's suicide. Once you start doing it, it's suicide, and it's suicide. The finality of suicide is physical death, but suicide begins when you start doing substances, crack, cocaine, you know, marijuana. These are smaller symptoms of suicide that lead up to the finality.

[Interview 88090884] Suicide includes drugs because when you look at our circumstances that we are faced with in our society, so many of our young people are really committing suicide through drugs.

A general reading of all thirty interviews of pastors indicates that there is agreement, in essence, with the above observations. It's interesting to note that the interview schedule did not include a question referring to other forms of self-injurious behavior. These responses were a reaction to the first interview schedule question which asked, "What is your definition of suicide?" Undoubtedly, the responses revealed a widely-held inclusive definition. One pastor put it very succinctly:

[Interview 87080881] Suicide is not doing the right thing. Suicide is hanging out there on these street corners selling dope, wasting your time doing nothing, drinking to death...you know, all these things that are negative and serve the devil's will and not God's. All of these things are not of God. They poison the body, which is the temple of God. Suicide is more than pulling a trigger or cutting your wrist. Of course that would be suicide too.

Some of the same sentiment was expressed by another church leader:

[Interview 87090881] Well, I believe that suicide is a person killing himself, regardless of what way he do it. It makes no difference. When a

person gives up on life as it with dope, alcohol or self-murder...that's all suicide.

The case is clear: the viewpoint that pastors have of suicide not only reflects the pastors theological view of suicide, that is, suicide is "sinful" and oppositional to God's authority, but underscores their political, economic, and social attitudes. Suicide suicide denies the sovereignty of God and is contrary to the teachings of the church, there is a consensus among pastors condemning this act.

As we shall see later, however, this tying together of suicide and other self-injurious acts is not maintained throughout by the pastors. Rather they do see a difference between clear-cut intended suicide and other actions such as drug taking. Both are condemned, but deliberately taking one's own life is somehow seen as less understandable and more reprehensible for black people than behavior such as drug abuse.

Condemnation of Suicide

Within the black community, there is an unequivocal condemnation of suicide as sin. The view of these pastors interviewed includes the notion that "Man is not the giver of life. Hence, man has not the authority to take life." In other words, "the Lord giveth and only the Lord taketh away." This attitude is evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

[Interview 87149882] Suicide is wrong. It is against God and nature. It's sinful and you cannot repent. Your soul is lost forever in hell.

[Interview 88124887] It's a serious sin. If a person doesn't have time to repent then they are in big trouble.

[Interview 88124888] We believe that suicide, or self-harm is a sin that one cannot be forgiven for.

[Interview 88124816] We don't condone suicide. We condemn it to the maximum. We believe that such people that commit never ask for forgiveness.

[Interview 88124826] It is horrible. It's against God and God does not accept it and it is sin. After it is committed I fully believe definitely that there is no chance of forgiveness for it.

The notion that suicide is sinful appears to be pervasive in the black community and is reinforced by black clergy. Much of this attitude comes from the perception that suicide is a sin that is unpardonable and unforgivable. An additional perception that appears to have surfaced is that blacks possess something that is uniquely and inherently black--that is a black "soul" in both the spiritual and worldly sense. The soul represents the gift of life. The soul is tied to the black experience both culturally and traditionally. If one is to locate one's soul a proper place (i.e., heaven) after death, it is important to live life as productively as possible despite life's many obstacles. Obstacles should not be a deterrent to live, but an encouragement to struggle. To struggle with the help of God is believed to enhance the quality of life

and make the individual resilient to pressures that would otherwise cause suicide. Suicide does nothing for the soul except place it in peril of eternal damnation.

Factors were asked "Has suicide ever been discussed from the pulpit? If so, what do you say?" Typical responses from those who did preach on it were:

[Interview 0010007] Black people believe in a heaven and hell. We've been taught, as black people, that if you kill yourself you automatically go to hell. There's no forgiveness for self-murder. This is true in thinking with the Bible. There's no forgiveness.

[Interview 0010004] God did not put us here to determine our own conception of life and taking it upon ourselves to make quick exits. That, biblically, is not an approved exit of God. It's unpardonable sin, one who commits suicide goes to hell and is unpardoned for their sin.

[Interview] Well now, you know, according to the Bible, we have what we call heaven and hell. Christ Jesus came to make it possible that whomever believeth in Him and follow His plan and is baptized, shall be saved. That's to escape eternal damnation. That's eternal separation from God. But a person who violates and rejects the promise and the plan of Jesus Christ, there is no other place for them but eternal separation from God. That's hell. What I try to do is get them to see the importance of accepting Christ. That's the first thing. To reject Christ is to just choose the way of eternal damnation, you see. To reject Christ means suicide to life in general. Not to accept Christ is to accept everlasting life.

[Interview 0008005] If you take your own life, why, it's a lost cause not only this life but in the life to come. I feel like blacks really consider this even more so that they have a soul that they must give an account for.

The reasoning is clear: suicide is wrong because it is a denial of the sovereignty of God. The soul belongs to God and is entrusted to the individual who is ultimately held accountable. This "accountability" is transmitted to the community by the church which puts a great value on life.

It should be noted here, however, that only a few pastors had delivered sermons specifically on the topic of suicide. The primary reason for not doing so is that suicide is not seen as a problem in the black community. One pastor described this view succinctly:

[Interview 00019001] Unlike alcohol, alcohol abuse and crime, suicide is not a prevailing problem in the black community. Dealing with suicide is not an oversight. It just is not a problem. So why try to fix something if it is not broken.

There is Always Hope

In general, the church's opposition to suicide recognizes no reason for suicide. There is no justification for "giving up." Suicide is not for the "true believer," a person that is "born again" or "saved."

[Interview 00140002, Visitation 01.1.] If you are saved you don't have to take yourself out. As sick as I have been in my life time, I have never thought of killing myself. As a pastor, I visit my members in the hospital when they are sick. I have never been with any of my members...I mean they have had cancer of all types, kinds, shapes; not one of them ever said that they wanted out of this here life. They always asked for prayer--most of them wanted to live. They even prayed for healing. Some of them said that if it be God's will they would die. Saved folks believe in God and His healing power.

[Interview 1009001] Christ gives us purpose for living and therefore we want to live to the fullest and do all the good we can while we live. And we are willing to die when anyone, but I think in the black community those who are religiously inclined, those who are members of the church, those who worship God tend to accept His value, the value that God places on life and therefore they are not prone to suicide.

Being a "believer" is accepting the authority and autonomy of God. This allows the individual to be excluded from or "not prone to suicide."

Depressive illness is not a reason to kill oneself when there is hope through prayer and healing. One pastor, for example, noted:

[Interview 1009007, vignette 21.1.] Suicide because of an illness is senseless. A person who knew Jesus Christ...who understood who Jesus is and what he does for them, black or white they know that they have a high hope. The hope is not just in what we have here, but what we can anticipate here and how we do here. We put hope beyond this place.

From these statements it becomes increasingly evident that suicide is viewed as that which stops the individual from fulfilling what God intended the individual to do. Hence, it's not a part of God's will. As one pastor put it:

[Interview 1009010] Suicide is the premature taking of one's own life by someone not consistent with a sound judgment. My theological view of suicide is that as the scriptures say "all things work to the good of all who love the Lord. They will be called according to his purpose." I feel that there is a purpose in everybody's life. Therefore, the taking of one's life is not within the framework of God's perfect will.

These views converge in the larger cultural perception in the black community that suicide is not the answer for

anything. Everyone has a purpose in life. The taking of one's life denies such purpose and challenges God's autonomy. While making out at the hardship and troubles in other ways may make some sense or serve some purpose for individuals, suicide does not.

Views on the Causes of Suicide and Why Blacks
in Love Suicide Among Blacks

The pastors were asked directly why they believed that suicide was seen as a problem for the African-American community and their views included how they would explain suicide. In Chapter 3, it was noted that the literature on black suicide expected that in the absence of protective factors blacks would attempt and complete suicide more frequently. I shall expand somewhat on that theme here as background for reporting the pastors' views on causes and prevention of suicide. The absence of a role model in the black family leads us to the black family deficit theory. This is used to explain black family collapse, as well as suicide among black youths. The dual role of black females as "breadwinners" and head of households is hypothesized to maximize the propensity of suicide (Davis, 1978, 1980, 1981). For black youths the absence or loss of a "sensitive, strong, loving masculine father figure causes psychological damage and leads to suicide" (Barton, 1981, pp. 407-412).

Sibbe and Martin's (1984) status integration theory proposes that suicide, black or white, is inversely related to the degree of integration of the group to which one belongs (Burkheim, 1968). Proponents of this theory argue that black suicide is premised on admission to the middle-class "American dream". Status integration theory represents the most widely used conceptual framework to explain the higher suicide and suicide attempt rates among young than among older blacks (Davis, 1986, p. 184). That is, despite the social, political and economic gains of the civil rights era, black Americans have not been able to "overcome" the many negative social forces inherent in the black experience. The fact that black Americans have been "slow" in transcending "barriers" in order to achieve a status comparable or better than that of their non-minority white counterparts may be contributing to suicide, attempted suicide and suicide ideations among African Americans. Others argue that the stress associated with subordination (i.e., poverty, discrimination, poor housing, low educational levels, and unemployment) is an impetus to black suicide.

In this study patterns offered two explanations for suicides and attempted suicides in the black community, both of which are consistent with these deprivation and deficit theories as well as Davis's proposition that suicide among African Americans is likely to occur with the weakening of

the relational spaces (Davis, 1999, p. 218). The first explanation by the pastors attributes suicide to a break down in religious and family ties. The second explanation is that suicide and attempted suicide among black Americans is related to the stress associated with the assimilation efforts of racial "integration." This greater integration into larger society is seen as undermining the internal integration and values of the black community. Black Americans are seen as having assimilated materialistic values, beliefs and norms of white American culture and that along with weakening ties in the black community induce a greater readiness to commit suicide. According to the pastors, the effects of this process has been "demonstrating." This view is echoed in the following interview:

[Interview #146611] I think in this case it goes back to our culture. We have been taught down through the years that we as a people don't do these kinds of things so far committing suicide. As a boy growing up I never knew anything about blacks committing suicide until integration came about and I believe black America then began to take on the traits, if you will, of white America.

[Interview #146602] We as a race have always been used to hardships. We are sure used to hardships than whites. Suicide was always more prevalent among whites than it was blacks. I personally believe that if black folks are killer' they said it's because of the integration. We're gotten where we're communicating closer with whites every day.

Violence, according to the pastors, is not an inherent part of the "African" tradition. Every pastor has boldly stated that such violence has been transmitted to black

Americans in assimilation through racial integration. Such efforts (black on black crime and drug abuse), according to the pastors, threaten the survival and development of black Americans. The question is why is not also action for high suicide rates among blacks?

Suicide is a "White Thing"

Collectively, the pastors believe that while black Americans may have become violent, suicide is not a part of that experience and is not perceived as a "social problem" that has severe implications for the black community. There is a clear message in these views of suicide that define it as almost a complete denial of black identity and culture. It is assumed that suicide is outside the black experience. It is simply not done. Suicide is a "white thing." This underlines the expression of concern, stated above, that one negative aspect to racial integration is that blacks may become more like whites in suicidal behavior.

The perception that suicide is a "white thing" is prevalent in the black community. This deep-seated assumption that suicide was a "white thing" was not initially a focus of this study, nor were there any questions in the interview schedule or survey alluding to it as a "white thing." Suicide is viewed as a white thing not simply because of its recognized greater statistical frequency among whites. Rather the phrase captures the idea

that suicide is almost inherent in white culture and almost totally antithetical to black culture. This was communicated to me when several pastors insisted that I should know better than to ask questions related to blacks and suicide because "suicide is a white thing." Comments such as, "As a rule blacks don't kill themselves...you should know this already."; "well, being black you should know that black people want to live"; "You should know that suicide is something that occurs over there, on the other side of the tracks"; and "We want to live son...we want to get there...you should know this."

It is so much an assumed part of being black that one is a bit surprised to have the question asked, especially by another black person. It is not just assumed about black religious people. It is assumed about all blacks. Even though both the pastors and I were openly religious and the topic at hand was religious beliefs on suicide, the pastors did not say, "You should know that, you're a Christian." Rather they said, "You should know that, you're black." The truth is that I took it so much for granted myself that I was in the process of doing the interviews before I recognized that it was an important issue that should be stated explicitly.

Pastors who were interviewed were unanimously of the opinion that some of the same difficulties and problems which might lead to suicide by whites do not pose such a

threat for African Americans. As we shall see later, this view was substantiated by the conclusions surveyed. The belief is that, if anything, economic, political and social deprivation has made black Americans more resilient.

[Interview 07170001] The suicide rate being so low among blacks goes back to the strength that we have as a culture. It goes back to the value systems that we were taught and even having been taught those value systems. We never get away from them. We have always been aware of what our roles were. We have always been aware of what our strengths were. Our strengths have overpowered our weaknesses. That has made us hold up, brace our shoulders back, and stand firm. In a sense, when the bullets to bounce off. The bullets hurt, but we've been taught to stand strong.

Of course, suicide is condemned by whites as well and the religious beliefs of white Christians regarding suicide probably do not differ much from the beliefs of black Christians expressed here. However, the significance of the church in the black community is felt to merit in a more pervasive and stronger influence of those beliefs than in the white community. Moreover, the concept that whites are fundamentally different in terms of their response to stress is clearly articulated by the pastors in this study. The black experience is seen as culturally, historically, politically, economically, and socially different from the white experience. Through the "struggle" black Americans have developed an apparent resilience to behavior that would otherwise be self-destructive.

[Interview 07180001] It is a low down stress for people to take their lives. That is something I could never quite understand. Ah...of course I

Don't hear of a single negro that has committed suicide. That's just something our people don't do. I am from the South. Don't hear all my life. We grew up on the land with values. Nobody took from their neighbors and nobody took themselves out. That's just something we never heard of in our community. Ah...negroes' time we ever heard about somebody killing themselves was through rumors. Those rumors didn't even deal with negroes. They were all white folks. My mom and dad struggled all their life and their people before them struggled. Some of them ever thought about killing themselves. I have struggled oh...you know me...we been struggling all of our lives. The greater the sufferin' oh...you know...oh...what we going to get will be better in heaven. That's what the old time preachers said. That's what my people always said...and so we always coped with whatever the dead was.

[Interview 00140000] As a rule they want to live. In my life time I have not witnessed a single black person that committed suicide. Well, one of the things is, you know, black people want to live. They want to live until they die. Most black people that are religious just believe that when God gets ready He's going to take away their life and they don't have to do it themselves. As a rule, the average person in the black community seem to struggle to obtain everything he gets.

[Interview 00179000] I worked as a clinical counselor at Georgia Mental Health Institute for nine years, basically dealing with whites who were at that point of committing suicide. There were very few blacks there because of that reason. The institution had very few blacks there period. One of the things that I have noticed as I've worked with them is something is that blacks have been faced with struggles and stresses all of their lives. It's something that they have endured through slavery and blacks have learned how to handle those pressures which does not allow them to even commit or attempt suicide. Nine times out of ten you find whites wanting to take their life. On the other hand my Afro-American Brothers and sisters have either worked through those issues or found ways out that were healthy.

[Interview 070000] Like with white folks, it could be externalities causing them to kill themselves. Not being able to deal with things

they struggled hard to get being taken away from them.

[Interview 00179018] White people are a little different than black. White people will give up quick under certain circumstances. White boys will kill their self over a girl. Girls will kill their self over boys. Blacks won't do that. Blacks will say, 'Well, the fuck with that. There's another one out there somewhere.' They'll use the term 'she's not the only fish in the sea' and go on. Whites, if they lose something or somebody, they'll commit suicide over it. A black won't.

[Interview 00000004] Well, on suicide, as I look at it, in the white race, usually they--their view on life is different from the black American, and usually if they are not able to carry out their objectives in life, to me, they get* in a more pressure stage, and they're certain to commit suicide more easily, in my belief.

The pastors portrayed blacks as being a more religious people than their white counterparts. Additionally, blacks were described as being able to endure more hardships and not succumb to the despair and despondency which leads to suicide. The black experience in America is one of struggle. Being able to live life in the black community is a struggle. Survival represents hope and the promise of a better life after death. The church unifies black Americans around a common tradition shaped out of suffering. It is the church that gives strength, identity, coping skills, and a reason for living. This suicide is considered as contradictory to what it seems to be black. Whites may do it, but blacks do not.

Summary

Pastors share the view that the church is intrinsically implanted in the nature and development of the Black culture. The aspirations of African Americans is linked to a "struggle" which is an outgrowth of the church. The church has a unique place in the black community. This is based upon firmly established attitudes, values, beliefs, and mores which provides social integration and moral values counter to suicide that pervade the black community. The church leaders interviewed in this study point to the black church as the institution which has provided structural, demographic, and cultural integration that has not only sustained hope for Black Americans, but provided resiliency in the face of deprivation and keeps suicide and suicide attempts low.

The church is seen as an extension of the black family. The church is the institution out of which black Americans are socialized. In fact, the black church and family are so inseparable that the church sets the standards out of which the black family functions.

Religious norms pervasive in the black community overwhelmingly condemn suicide. Suicide is perceived as being "sinful" and "against God's perfect will." A distinction is made between "clear-cut" suicide and other self-harmful behavior such as drug taking. While both are

deigned, "clean-cut" suicide is more unambiguous and unthinkable than other self-injurious acts.

For the most part, black Americans in this study attribute suicide, if it occurs, to the assimilation effects of "integration" and the disintegration of religious interests and family bonds. Suicide is not perceived as being part of the black identity. It is, however, equated with being white and occurring in white America or "across the tracks." Black Americans may be violent and express that violence outwardly, but in the words of one pastor "to our credit at least we don't kill ourselves." That's a "white thing."

The next chapter will present, through vignettes, a clearer picture of the attitudes, opinions, beliefs and feelings of church leaders toward suicide compared to other forms of self-injurious and deviant behavior. The goal of the vignettes is to contrast rates and responses to suicide with more prevalent forms of deviance, such as crime, alcohol and drug use/abuse in the black community. Hence, we can compare the perceived role that the black church and family play in these social issues.

CHAPTER 4
BLACK REACTION, BELIEF, AND CHURCH RESPONSES
TO THE VIOLENCE

Part of understanding the social meaning of suicide in the black community comes from our knowledge of the norms and social relations of the black church and family. The literature suggests that the black church together with the black family have influenced the low rates of suicide within the black community. However, these institutions appear to have been less effective in countering violence among blacks.

This chapter examines other forms of life threatening behavior through the use of vignettes in presenting findings from vignettes, responses are identified by notations such as (07140002, V01,1,). The first eight numbers in this notation indicates the interview date and number. V01 indicates the first situation of the first vignette. This is followed by the number of the follow-up question.

This study offers no comparison of the religious views in the black community on suicide with attitudes of whites on suicide. The pastors did frequently offer experiences with whites based on their experiences and these are reported. However, it was felt that some additional way of

examining what differences religious views on suicide make you needed. This is the purpose of the vignettes. They were utilized to compare the effect of the church on suicide with the role of the church regarding other forms of deviance. The vignettes depict different situations and behavior regarding suicide, crime, and drugs and asking for responses to them from the informants. These responses are analyzed to discover differences, if any, between the normative climate for suicide and other deviance. The initial intent of the study was to review responses to real cases of suicide, but preliminary inquiries showed little chance of reviewing responses to real instances of suicide; there weren't any. But the first vignette contains a hypothetical scenario that involved a suicide and the second vignette is of attempted suicide. The other vignettes are of violence and drugs.

In the first vignette pastors were given a situation in which a suicide had occurred:

A church member, whom you have known for years, has changed since her husband of forty years committed suicide after learning that he had prostate cancer. She stays relatively to herself, has dropped out of church activities, lost weight, and appears unhappy. At first you thought that her behavior was typical of mourning, but it has now been well over a year since her husband's death and she appears to be getting worse instead of better.

The pastors were asked seven follow-up questions (see appendix B). For instance, pastors were asked "What would

you say about her husband's suicide?" This question was asked both to elicit additional information on attitudes, values, and norms and to elicit social responses to suicide by surviving members in which a suicide had occurred. The pastors' articulated a viewpoint that was supportive and caring toward the widow, but offered strong opposition to suicide and absolutely no justification for the taking one's life. Again, as in response to the general question, a clear distinction is drawn between the way african americans would react to the situation and the way in which whites are believed to react. Typical responses were:

[PASTOR1, VII.1.] Sir, He probably wasn't saved. If he had been saved, he probably would not have taken himself out. If you are asked and you would know what I am talking about. Saved, folk believe in God and his healing power. This is an interesting situation. As much as I have been in my life time, I have never thought of killing myself. As a pastor, I visit my members in the hospital when they are sick. I have never been with any of my members...I mean they have had cancer of all types, kinds, strokes and oh...not one of them ever said that they wanted out of this here life. They always asked for prayer. Most of them wanted to live...even prayed for healing...oh...some of them said that if it be God's will they would die. So this here is not typical of a black person with a sickness. Now I have known and heard of white folks in this position killing themselves".

[PASTOR2, VII.1.] The power that Jesus have left us through divine healing, what's already provided for us in atonement, he didn't have to commit suicide.

[PASTOR3, VII.1.] First of all, he committed a sin that should not have been committed. Because the Lord said thou shall not kill, and just he had a disease that mostly he fall within himself was incurable. That doesn't mean that he should've

take his own life. Personally, he said a very bad mistake. Because, the Bible really say in 120 Psalm, the Lord said he forgive the iniquities and he healeth all thy diseases. So many times the Lord allow different trials to come upon his people in various places. That could have been one of his trials he see whether he could, whether he could remain steadfast in the face of that.

[INTERVIEW, VII.1.] Well, as far as her husband's suicide, I would say that he lost the hope that is ingrained or that I try to, as pastor, instill in all of my parishioners, particularly, that there is hope. Life is a empty vessel without a certain amount of hope. That's the reason, I would think, that the innocent tend to suicide. The hope in our lives, it has a tendency to sustain us. As such, we think we life may be at whatever point, when there is a rap of hope one seems to be able to meet whatever opposition or problem he or she is going through with and looking for a brighter and a better day.

Again, it remains clear that there is an overall condemnation of suicide as sin. Terminal disease is not an excuse for "giving up." Nor should it interfere with living life to its fullest. It merely reduces the quality of life through struggle. After all, struggling is inherently part of the black experience.

The pastors had many conceptions of what constituted suicide. Pastors were asked "How do you define this person's suicide?" This attitude is evidenced in the following vignette excerpt:

[INTERVIEW, VII.2.] I would define the suicide in this case as being one that has resulted because of a lack of faith, the lack of trust in God. The physical illness has caused them to begin to doubt and trust. I would define it as a loss of faith and lack of trust in God.

[04418037, Vol.3.] You kill yourself and you think you out of the trouble. You're really condemning the sinner. No way to be saved when you kill yourself. So, now, if a man commits suicide, you know he's going to hell. It's a written thing. He's bound for hell. Ain't no chance to forgive, to get forgiveness because you don't have no chance to ask for forgiveness.

[04238005, Vol.3.] I'd define it as an act of foolishness. Because there is a God above and he say, "Anything you ask in my name, I'll give it to you." But, he didn't ask to heal him, he didn't ask God to put him on the right direction to get healed.

[04268021, Vol.3.] I would define it as, as a suicide where unfortunately, the person just lost hope, gave up hope. But I think that if perhaps someone could have, again a family member or someone that's real strong, could've just continued to encourage his heart to hold on or to hang in there, this could've been prevented.

[04268015, Vol.3.] I would define that as being a promise that he did not really have the Lord. He never trusted the Lord. People brought up in the church don't commit suicide They're hooked on the fact that even to death God is gonna' take care of it. It's gonna' always. It's gonna' get better. The Lord is gonna' see to it.

[04048005, Vol.3.] I would define his suicide as very, very disrespectful to the Lord as his servant, because if he had been a child of God and trusting in the Lord, then after a period of years, he should've known--he knew that anyway, that it was wrong to destroy his own life.

[04148003, Vol.3.] It is just like I said...sinful! We would just have to pray for his soul. I can't pass judgment on this poor man. I don't know what was going on in his mind. I can only say that whatever it was...ah...he didn't take it to the altar. That's where he should have gone. I believe we could have saved him and given him that peace he needed. Now, he will never have that peace.

It continues to be clear that there is always hope. The hope is provided on faith in God's "healing power" which serves to sustain life and shield the individual from self-destruction. Suicide is viewed as that which destroys the soul, reduces God omnipotence, and detours one from reaching one's true potential and fulfill God's will. Given the centrality of the church and its moral leadership, it's probable that these religious views permeate black America and transmit to the community that suicide is not an acceptable remedy for anything. These views on suicide may not be held as strongly throughout the community as by these pastors, but they can be expected to be shared to a large extent.

In the next chapter, I will show that these views are certainly shared by church members. I have no way here of showing how widespread they are beyond that, but clearly the pastors feel that their moral authority affects not only the church, but goes beyond the church to exceed that of other community leaders.

[0008000, Vol.1.] It would vary. It depends on the pastor. The black church has always varied according to the pastor-

[00080010, Vol.1.] In the black church the people look at the minister and the response of the minister usually flows through the congregation. I saw 99% of the church goes the way that the minister goes and it is very different from a white church. Very different, very different. The minister in the black community is the power. That's the custom. It's not the school teacher or the judge. It's the black minister. So the congregation is going to respond how the minister

is. In fact, they wait on a word from the minister about the situation and then they will come back requesting what the minister said about the situation. So if the minister tells the church "The Lord is gonna' fix it for mother" then the church will start saying to one another "The Lord is gonna' fix it."

The view that the ministers influence the responses the active church participants and others is echoed in the interview protocols of other pastors, further supporting the notion that the church influences much of what happens within the black community.

Black Americans view themselves as being more religious, more spiritual, and more able to endure hardships than their white counterparts. This attitude is reflected in the interviews, surveys, and vignette responses. For instance, pastors were asked "Suppose you could have encountered her husband before his suicide?" Typical responses underscored the importance of having a strong connection to the church, as well as faith in the authority of God, and strong, loving support from church, family and friends.

[H011000, V01-7.] I would have dealt with him through scriptures and continued to give him scriptures that even when the doctors have given up on him there is hope. If he would have the faith God could perform a miracle. He should trust God regardless because God could be able to perform a miracle in his life. If he was able to, probably would have happened much quicker. I just think the white person would have given up earlier because he probably wouldn't have had that faith in God to trust as long.

[H714000, V01-7.] Well, knowing that he had cancer I would have been visiting with him on a

regular basis. I do this with all my members that are sick. I would be praying with him...the word of God is powerful enough to keep his race killing himself. You know, the word of God...God's grace...yes, glory glory is powerful enough to heal him. It saved my child and made an adult. Understand what I am talking about? That's what I would have done. Together with his wife and church family we would have that child...that man to protect him. I am talking about the church family. The church is our mother...oh...child...our only hope. That's what has always been there when it looked like we were lost. With God and the church...oh...this man would have gone to glory...if had been God's will....not very long ago.

[0712004, Vol.7.] I would encourage him that the same God that worked miracles in the past, is still interested in his survival and would be out the answer! God give you life and you're still living. Live with what you have under the fear and direction of the Lord, and let him, when he gets ready--if you take your life brother James, then how do you know that God did not have a plan to heal you, or maybe God will use you through a ministry even with what you're living with. Others have had cancer and they was healed Brother John, and therefore, if you're going to take it into your own hands, that's not wise. The scriptures teaches that we're not to be wise of our own conceits, but to trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not unto our own understanding. In all our ways, acknowledge him, brother James, and he will direct your path. Will you accept his Word? Accept his Word, brother James. This is not the way. I love you. God love you. Your family love you. This church love you. You got friends that's been around you. You're not alone. Brother James, God loves you and he does not want you to take others in your own hands. Think about it. This body that you live in is not really you. You didn't make this body. You didn't create this body. That's God. Brother James, as your brother, as your pastor, and as a Christian, try to stand before God with a natural cause of death and not suicide."

[0712007, Vol.7.] Well, if I could have talked to him I would have told him that you don't need to take your own life. The Lord give you your life. You ought to stay here long as you can.

When the Lord get ready for you, He'll come get you. He'll take your life from you when he get ready. But you don't need to rush it off and end your life because of some kind of exciting news you get and all like that. I'd tell him, no, you don't need to do that. If you put your trust in God and faith in Him and trust your Bible, why, that will help you tide over the problems that you have.

Among African Americans, faith and the reliance upon God and family are seen as the factors that influence the individual's ability to struggle and withstand elements which may contribute to suicide among other racial and ethnic groups. Through religious expression the African American traditionally and historically has been able to find refuge from political, economic and social oppression/hardships and healing during illness. Obviously, the social integration factors operating here lie in the black family and church which have shown resiliency under stressful conditions. From the responses here there can be no justification for suicide. Even under the most traumatic conditions, suicide is unthinkable and unimaginable.

To investigate further views on suicide and responses to suicidal behavior, a second vignette was presented to patients which contained a situation in which an attempted suicide had occurred:

A fifteen year old youth has reacted badly to his parent's divorce some months ago. Always introverted, the child is now quiet and withdrawn. In school the child isolates himself from his peers and has dropped off the basketball team. His friends avoid him and his grades have dropped. His father was always active in his life, and you suspect that he feels abandoned by him. His

mother, with whom he lives, tends to let him alone, to do whatever he wants. The child has told a school counselor that he is tired of living and that he would like to go to a far away problem-free place where he can find ultimate peace. The child insists that he is the reason that his parents aren't living together. He believes that the divorce would not have occurred if his parents really loved him. Frustrated, the child has come to you to tell you of his attempts to find a way to "escape from it all." Crying and rolling up his sleeves slowly, the child reveals scars where he has slashed his wrist several times.

The pastors were asked four follow-up questions to this vignette (see Appendix B). For example, pastors were asked to "talk to us like you would talk to that boy regarding suicide," and "How would you approach this boy's mentioning of suicide as a pastor?" in order to determine their perception of suicide attempts. From the following excerpts we see that even attempted suicide is viewed as undesignation and as widely condemned as completed suicide. Again, the response to attempted suicide would be caring and supportive, while still passing stern judgment on it as a sin that will bring eternal judgment.

(L0374020, V02.1.) I would not have let it get to the point where the youth was ready to end his life. I think one of the key things, as a pastor, as for the pastor to be aware of the behavior of his members, particularly in a church where the membership is not up in the hundreds. It provides the pastor a bit more personal relations, more personal contact with members of his congregation. Secondly, the child, as a result of the divorce, felt that he has lost a great deal. Life was not worthy of being continued by him and so he sought to end his life by various means. I would try to make him feel in view of the fact that his father and mother has divorced, I would, to some degree, tell that child he is father since I am the pastor

of the church and in many instances the father of the members of the church. I would try to make him feel comfortable in view of the fact that he has a substitute, that he has another male image that he can look up to, that he can feel proud of, that he can idolize, even though I will not be his father but I would try to fill the void.

[SPRINGFIELD, VHS.1.] What would I tell you about killing yourself? I say, "Let me tell you something, son. If you kill yourself, that's not going to help neither nor father. Say, if you kill yourself, when time come to give an account of the death in your body, mother, father, sister, brother and some other is going to stand before the judge but you. Say all of this will be up against you.

[SPRINGFIELD, VHS.2.] I'm gonna say what would you gain by committing suicide? I mean, what would you get out of it. I mean, and most of all, are you ready to meet God? And what if you failed? Do you plan to be...play basketball or football or tennis or golf or what have you? If you blast out your life now, you're going to lose it all. You're looking forward to the future with kids or a family. I mean, what is the profit of man even if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? You commit suicide now, you gonna lose it all. No. I mean, from my standpoint, I've had adversity in life and even in my early years, I can remember when I didn't have sufficient clothes to wear, shoes to wear, didn't have the food that I really would have liked to have eaten, but I made it through. There are other sources that you can really go to get help. I mean, but if you take you life now, you're going to lose everything. You won't even have a chance to experience what's in store for you. I want you to know that you are not alone. I mean, I am here and I've had many experiences with young people and, you know, you can make it but if you give up on life now, there is no chance because there is no opportunity after you're gone to the grave.

[SPRINGFIELD, VHS.2.] I would say "It's no need to kill yourself. Say, they love you. Other people love you. You getting along fine with your school system. To take your life at the age of fifteen, with a lot of life ahead of you and a lot of things to do, a lot of achievements to make, get your degree, get your profession going, marry,

have your family, got a lot going for you, are taking your life and nothing is all as not the answer by no means. You can overcome this. Having a brilliant Spanglish gives meaning and purpose for our lives. So all in all, no matter what, the experiences in the black community with a strong religious background you say you believe and have value laid on life. It is good to be alive and to have purpose in our living. We are not just here like an animal or a plant in the forest we have a purpose. We were created in the image of God and consequently you have a reason to live. Come on now, your parents love you. I love you. The church loves you.

[0010000, Vol.1.] I would let him know that life is really worth living and there is happiness and that he would make a great mistake if he would commit suicide because he has too much to live for. He has too much before him and certainly I would tell him that the Lord is there for him and if he would really seek God there is an answer to your problem and there is happiness with God and you can live on.

[0010000, Vol.1.] I would tell him that this is really not the right thing to do. We're not supposed to take our own lives because Jesus came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly. Jesus didn't come for us to commit suicide but he came that we might live.

[0010000, Vol.1.] As he would mention suicide, I would begin to lecture him that first of all, that is the wrong direction to take. I would try to...I would say "If you would try to, on destiny your life then, you would possibly wind up in hell, and nobody wants to go to that place. You as a young man, you got too much to look forward to. You're still in school; possibilities in junior high school. You don't know, you might become a doctor. You might become a lawyer. You might become a minister. Give life a chance. Get that thought out of your mind completely. If you allow the things I'm saying to you to become part of you, I guarantee you'll be a better person."

The interplay between the church and the family supports the notion that there is always hope and that suicide is not

an acceptable alternative is pervasive in the black community. Again, everyone has a purpose for living. Hardships, discriminations, and injustices do not excuse it. "Coping up," through suicide, is ignored and throws away any chance the individual has to reach an unexpected potential.

To investigate pastors' views on drug use pastors were presented a third vignette (see Appendix F) in which pastors were given a situation involving the behavior of a substance abuser:

Ernest is a 38-year-old, single, unemployed man who has a problem with alcohol and multiple drug abuse (marijuana, speedies, and crack). Ernest grew up in the church. He was baptized, sang in the youth choir, and always attended Sunday school and church services with his family. His family is still an active part of your congregation. Ernest, on the other hand, spends most of his time drinking very heavily with only several short periods of being sober. Ernest is still living at home with his parents. According to his mother, he comes and goes as he pleases. Ernest has been arrested several times by the local police and his driver's license was suspended over a year ago for driving while intoxicated. When Ernest is sober he makes an occasional appearance in church. However, when he is "high" he gets together with his old friends who, like him, misuse alcohol and drugs. Ernest needs help and his parents have asked you to intervene.

Pastors all agree that the experience of black Americans in the United States has been one of violence. According to those interviewed, this has been exacerbated and perpetuated by the involvement of African Americans with alcohol and drugs. The responses to questions regarding this vignette such as "How would you evaluate the seriousness of the

situation and what would you do about it?" and "How would you evaluate Ernest's behavior?" since that church leaders perceive alcohol and substance abuse as a "social problem" that has severe implications in the black community. Unlike suicide and suicide attempts, the pastors report frequent experiences with persons involved in alcohol and drug abuse.

[0009000, V01.1.] Now this young man is 18 years old. He's single. He's without employment and he has taken a habit of drinking, using various drugs, and his family members are members of the same church. I would take it very seriously, because really I have been faced with situations basically in that same nature. I have even been in a seminar in Rochester, New York, especially on ways how to try to help persons that are involved in drinking and drugs. Because as we know, that is what is causing so many of our black young men to be destroyed today.

[0014000, V01.1.] That is typical in the black family. Our families are different from white families. Drugs, like you can have a twenty-eight-year-old child at home. I don't believe you have that with white families. They would never had that boy in some high class expensive place where he could get help. He took doesn't have that kind of money where we can provide that kind of care. All we have is the church. The church is always there. We do it all and take care of it all. This is a...a serious problem in this picture.

[0014000, V01.1.] Now, let me tell you. This behavior is bad behavior. It's typical of what is happening to our black men. I preach against this all the time. With the black family losing some of its power cause of all these material things...you know...fancy cars, jewelry, expensive houses, luxuries...ah...we never had those things and we lived our lives right. Now, the more our people, especially the young ones go for it...ah...that is where it takes them. What more can I say? Ernest's behavior is not right. But it's what's happening out there in the world.

[04114001, Vol.1.] Of course alcohol and drug abuse is a major problem. Now you have a twenty-eight year old, single, unemployed male still living at home with his parents. Probably the influence of his friends they have more influence on him than probably his family has over him. Partly what is to evaluate the seriousness of the situation I am not real sure whether I would, doing what he is doing is wrong and...by that's a good one because I am dealing with that particular issue right now in the community where we are. Unless we change the environment, change the demand for what he is doing he knows is wrong then we are not going to the person.

[04114007, Vol.1.] I was saying that the system is not set up where they actually help the poor people or black people as they claim they is supposed to help them. I don't think you do a lot much good to give him an appointment to come back ten days and he already told you carried him there, he said: "I need some help. Help me". And, I know I done prayed for him and all. I got a young man comes right home now. He comes to my house and he talks hard of around them and like and say he knows the Lord has got something for him to do and he's trying to get to it. I take hold of his hand and pray for him and goes on, but he still deals with that stuff. I say, now, are you still smoking that stuff? And he says "Reverend, I ain't gonna tell you no lie. I'm still smoking every once in a while." And whenever you got people like that, they really need professional help. I think they're short of people to work on people who are low income when they got problems because I have known more of them to come through by getting professional help.

With the contrasting responses to this case and the suicide vignettes. Interesting here is the fact that the pastors deplore the use of alcohol and drugs as a remedy for problems. The pastors condemn substance abuse almost as much as suicide. But it is not the degree to which suicide and other forms of deviance are condemned. Rather it appears to be the extent to which the pastors are more

understanding of how conditions might move one to crime and drugs than of how these conditions could move one to suicide. In this case, Lyness's behavior is unacceptable, but understandable because of social conditions (i.e., lack of education, unemployment, and poverty) which may lead to a deviant behavior. This viewpoint was articulated through comments such as, "Dealin' with drugs is bad business and is a kind of suicide, but times being the way they are, no jobs in all--are killin' our young black men", "There is no reason for this hard young man hangin' out there dealin' drugs, but what can someone who don't have an education and a job do?", "A little boy told me that he could make more money selling dogs than he could raising yards.", and "It's sin, but who is going to work for minimum wage when they can make one hundred times that much standin' on a corner lookin' out for the man."

This attitude of substance use/abuse as being unacceptable, but understandable, appears to permeate the pastors' responses. This helps us understand how the church's normative influence may aid to keep the suicide rate low while it has less impact on other life threatening behavior. That is, that the church may be able to firmly transmit values that serve to control and regulate self-destructive behavior. The uncompromising uniformity on the part of the church make suicide for most African Americans unthinkable. On the other hand, the church's flexibility or

"recognition to the rage" attitude may have little impact on other forms of life threatening behavior. Drug abuse and violence against others is wrong, but not unthinkable. Suicide is also wrong, but sometimes is understandable for a black person. This is clearly articulated in the fourth vignette which involves a homicide.

In the fourth vignette (see Appendix 4) pastors were given a situation which involved an eighteen year old youth recently arrested and charged with a murder and with a history of crime:

Charles is an eighteen-year-old youth who has just been arrested and charged with the murder of another youth. Charles grew up in the black community in Greenville where he lived with his mother, a member of your church, and five siblings. Charles never knew his father, as his father abandoned his mother when he was an infant. As the eldest of six children, Charles spent most of his time caring for his younger brothers and sisters while his mother worked as a janitor in a downtown bank. Charles was an average student in high school until he dropped out in the junior year. He claims he dropped out of school for good reasons. Frustrated, Charles began setting out at home and stealing from his mother's purse. Finally, Charles' mother told him to either get a job or go back to school where he could get his diploma. Unable to get a job, Charles got involved in sex violations.

The pastors were asked four follow-up questions, two of which were: "How would you evaluate Charles' behavior?" and "How would you evaluate the seriousness of Charles' situation?" The pastors were unanimous. They condemned the behavior, but offered possible explanations as to why Charles may have engaged in the behavior. Recall that the

perhaps also vehemently opposed suicide, but offered absolutely no justification or explanation for the taking of one's life. They spent much time debating the issues that motivated Charles to commit murder, but offer little to see these same issues as motivating suicide. By contrast typical responses of the fourth vignette were:

[00148001, V04.1.] I would say that Charles' behavior was motivated by his parents. In other words, his parent in this case has the responsibility of disciplining and motivating. The mother with the six children we could say the boy was very devoted to his family and he did all he could for his siblings. However, after he grew up to a certain age he began to feel neglected, he to speak, with responsibility that he didn't earn. Many times it is wrong for the parents to put this type of responsibility on their children. This is the case for black Americans. My mother and father separated when I was six months old and I didn't see my father until I was six or eight years old. Eventually he died when I was twelve. So then the larger children had to take care of and maintain the responsibility as is typical of the black family. When the parent neglects the older child with the responsibility that he don't need or what he shouldn't have it always makes them find a way to get out. For instance, he don't have any money, no time ah, the parents fail to appreciate him...ah...what I mean by appreciation, any something like you are doing a good job or you handled that situation well etc. Our parents fail to do this. That leaves the child with nothing in terms of support. The child is then forced to find his own relief.

[00148002, V04.1.] Oh. This behavior is unacceptable one. It seems to be what we are seeing more and more of in our community. Parents not being responsible and placing what would be for them to do on their children. Our situation as a race has created this kind of thing...ah...our people don't have the kind of money white folks have to send our children to day care. We don't have the clubs and parks for our kids. So, our kids are left at home to grow up. This is what happened to Charles. His behavior is typical of

what we have been hearing about. That's why it is so important for the church to assist these mothers and fathers with their families.

[07140001, Vol.2.] Well, let's see...uh...it's pretty serious. The boy doesn't have any way of expressing his self other than the way you have it. That's what is happening to our children. They need to have right of way to the same things the white kids have. This would release some of the pressure on our mothers and fathers. Perhaps this would even keep our men and women from breaking up. It's serious son. A lot of these have families break up because there are too many pressures at home...uh...too many children, no job, no education and it goes on and on. Our families just don't have it easy like the white families. This causes our people to be frustrated and eventually they explode. Who else can they hurt but themselves' son. You know the story. The white man has so much control that they don't dare to hurt him. They are afraid to kill themselves as they go out and kill a brother. That's how it has always been. You can see this happening to Charles. He is so frustrated with what he doesn't have that he goes out and takes it. He's not taking it from the white man. He's taking it from his man. What can I say.

[08030001, Vol.2.] As always, people's response or reactions have some basis in the deficiency or lack of something that people want. In the case of Charles, an eighteen-year-old boy, perhaps he is frustrated never having known his father in the first place. The mother then is a single parent working to take care of them. He is given the illusion of going to school or get a job. Without education he can't get the job he want. So he ends up taking less of an approach in trying to school rather than working and that leads on to the ultimate murdering somebody. In Charles' problem may be in the lack of self-worth. Beginning with frustration of not being able to get what he want and not having had any preoccupation instilled in him by a father. Perhaps, he tried to take the less of ways to get on in life by stealing and end up getting violence or whatever and out of frustration or whatever ends up killing somebody. Maybe not premeditated, but kill somebody nevertheless. Now I don't know what that evaluation is viable or not but that is way I would look at it initially. By no means is it

Justifiable. I am trying to say that perhaps the root of his behavior is a combination of a lot of things. A lot of modifications if you will. I am trying to show how some things can lead up to, say back there, not having had any parental guidance say from a father. Maybe the mother don't have even that much time anyway to be with him and he stuck with trying to raise his own brothers and sisters that are younger than him. No high school training and no job. The man is frustrated, perhaps feeling inferior and different from the other guys who got what he wants and he can't get it because he's not up to par.

[BROOKSII, Vol.2.] I think Charles is so different from no other young man. He has allowed himself to get caught up in society. He wants what society has to offer him. He wants freedom. He wants guidance. He wants a quick dollar here and there. So he no longer wants to go to school. He says that he can't find a job. So what I'm gonna do is stay at home. I'm gonna risk everything that I can from my man.

For the most part, the pastors view of crime and murder is equal to their view of suicide it's sin. However, they tend to see Charles as a victim of his environment regarding the homicide. First, they blame the parents, insisting that black parents should not place their children in adult roles before they reach adulthood. Second, they blame society for economic deprivation and not providing black families with the benefits that are afforded to white families. Third, they insist that violence would not be so prevalent in the black community if African Americans had better economic, educational and employment opportunities.

Second that in response to the suicide vignettes, the pastors refer to some of those circumstances. Suicide is sinful and adversity can be overcome without resorting to

suicide. It is not that the pastors attempt to excuse or justify the violent behavior against others, but they do see it as explicable in the face of deprivation. They see suicide as inexplicable in the face of the same deprivation.

Summary

Results from the vignettes show consensus and uniformity with the results of the first part of the interview. The views of pastors did not change even when they were given hypothetical situations involving suicide, attempted suicide, drug use and crime. The pastors continued to reinforce the notion of the church as being firmly embedded within the black experience. Moreover, pastors articulated their condemnation and opposition to suicide as alternative to living with a terminal illness. They simply reject and abhor suicide. While the pastors condemned crime and drug abuse they somehow understood the behavior. For the most part, the pastors attributed violence in the black community to the "system" or conditions (economic, political and social) which may support violence toward others, but not toward one's self.

The next chapter will present the findings from congregation surveys. The goal of the church survey is to measure the extent to which the views of the pastors have been transmitted to and are shared by the congregation. This should substantiate and partially validate information from the interviews with pastors.

CHAPTER 7 RESULTS OF THE SURVEY OF CHURCH MEMBERS

Recall that the interviews with church pastors were conducted to see the extent to which the African-American church condemns, transmits, and reinforces attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms counter to suicide in the African-American community. Part of the interviews utilized vignettes in order to compare and contrast norms and responses to suicide with other forms of life-threatening behavior, such as alcohol and drug use/abuse and violent crime. The results from the interviews were presented in Chapters 3 and 4. This chapter contains a discussion of the survey results. The moral and social views promulgated by the church leaders and adhered to by the active church participants should be influential in the views of the black community not excluding those on suicide. I do not attempt to demonstrate this influence in the community studied, but the assumption of the centrality of the black church is common in the literature, and is stated unequivocally by the pastors, and shared to a large extent, as well, by church participants.

The percentage distribution of responses to key items from the questionnaire are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Role of the Church in the African-American Community

Statement	Level of Agreement with Statement				
	1	2	3	4	5
		Percent			N=300
1. The church has always been a central gathering place where black Americans could get together and only our country has for other social and political activities.	4.7%	8.7%	38.8%	34.4%	89.8%
2. The church has been the primary liberator and advocate of black Americans in the United States.	3.3%	8.8%	35.8%	34.4%	81.8%
3. Pastors are among the most informed persons in the black community and provide the most important source of leadership.	3.7%	8.8%	35.3%	38.3%	79.3%
4. The ties between the church and the family in the black community are as close as they are usually are in the race.	4.3%	10.8%	38.8%	39.8%	87.8%

Table 4a. *Bacilliformis* Norms on *Isolids*

Statement	Levels of Agreement with Statement: Percent Choosing				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Isolids is not whatis God's perfect will.	0.04	3.36	6.50	14.44	85.74
2. People who commit isolids lose their souls and spend eternity in hell.	4.04	6.36	20.04	23.24	47.36
3. Blood/droog was in a type of isolids because it darkens the body.	10.04	3.36	6.44	18.04	62.04
4. Each Isolids has a tendency to exhibit of such a higher value as life and in the freely role that with Isolids.	0.0	18.04	25.76	28.74	28.44
5. There is some evidence that isolids may be increasing among African Americans. This is because of integration since the 1960s.	8.44	18.04	20.44	24.04	30.04
6. Isolids has always been a "white thing" that black Americans just could not do.	1.44	28.04	25.44	27.04	18.04

Although I began with the idea of using response categories on a traditional Likert scale (i.e., ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a midpoint clearly indicated as having no opinion), I did not in fact survey the church members with that type of questionnaire item. Rather the responses essentially formed a 5-point ordinal scale of agreement or consensus. My concern was in the degree of consensus in the congregation and not so with the extent of disagreement. Therefore, the survey instructions (see appendix H) I gave orally, after the questionnaires had been distributed to each member present, asked them to express the extent of their agreement to each statement. Questions such as, "I don't understand these numbers all too well. What do they mean?", and "can we circle more than one number?" were repeatedly asked, indicating confusion. After several questions from members with regard to circling the numbers in the first church surveyed, I instructed the respondents "to circle 1 if you disagree with the statement and one of the other 4 numbers if you agree with the statement." That was meant to anchor the responses to 1 on the scale. Unfortunately, it also failed to provide a mechanism for respondents to indicate "no opinion." Not having done it this way with the first group I decided to proceed with all of the remaining questionnaires administrations with the same instructions. This represents a limitation on interpretation of findings. However, it is

reasonable to treat the responses as ordinal degrees of consensus, and that is the way they will be treated in this analysis.

Tables 3 and 4 only reflect the percentage distribution of responses to ten out of seventeen questions contained in the questionnaire. Appendix J contains demographic data, as well as the responses to all of the questionnaire's items. Examination of the data in these tables indicates a high degree of consensus among the church members on the same beliefs about suicide and other life-threatening and criminal behavior as held by the pastors. The views expressed by the pastors are not theirs alone. They are shared to a large extent by churchgoers.

Pastors were asked "what is the role of the black church in the black community?" and "is the black church a vital and integral part of the black family?" Pastors present the black church as not solely the religious and spiritual face of the black community. It's outreach is seen to pervade in the black community and is reflected in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of African Americans. According to the pastors, the attitudes and feelings of African Americans largely flow from a matrix of social, economic, political, religious, and cultural relationships which have existed historically between black Americans and the black church. Not surprisingly, they see the church as central to the black experience and providing social and

cultural integration for the black community. That church members share this perception of the centrality of the church and its importance to other institutions in the community is shown in Table 3. Only 4.7 percent of those surveyed circled 1 on the scale and over three-fourths circled 4 or 5 on the scale in agreeing with the statement that the church is central to the black community (see statement 1 in Table 3). Both the pastors and congregations point to the church as being the institution providing educational, political, and social leadership (see statement 2 and 3 in Table 4). Although the strength of agreement is less than with the other statements in the table, the church is perceived by the respondents as an extension of the black family such that both institutions are seen as one entity (statement 4 in Table 5). This same notion was articulated by the pastors when they were asked "how does the black church view its role in the black family?" These results support the reports of the pastors in the interviews. There is consensus that the church is very important in the black community and plays a major role in the black experience. However, the congregations were somewhat less convinced of this than the pastors. Although, eight out of ten circled 3 or higher in response to the item only slightly over half agreed in strongest agreement of 4 or 5. Note, this data doesn't answer the question of whether or not there would be less consensus if we took this issue outside of the church.

In order for us to understand the social meaning of suicide in the black community, it is important to examine the context in which values, attitudes, beliefs and norms similar to suicide expressed by the pastors are transmitted and shared by others. This study suggests that these are transmitted and that there is considerable consensus on the pastors' views.

The pastors were asked "What is your definition of suicide?", "What is your attitude and theological view of suicide?", and "What is your church's position or attitude toward suicide?" Typical responses of the pastors underscored both their personal and religious views of suicide. Among the pastors there was an unequivocal condemnation of suicide as being unacceptable, unimaginable, and sinful. It is clear here that there is a strong religious opposition and condemnation of suicide among black Americans. There is strong consensus among those surveyed on the belief that suicide is against God's will (see Statement 1 in Table 4). Those same respondents believed that suicide is sin and those who commit suicide lose their souls and spend eternity in hell (see Statement 3 in Table 4).

It is interesting to note that over three-fourths of those surveyed circled 4 or 5 on the scales showing strong agreement with the statement that alcohol and drug use is a type of suicide (see Statement 5 in Table 4). This view is

consistent with that of the pastors who generally viewed alcohol and drug use as a form of suicide. However, when the pastors were given an opportunity to be specific about what constituted suicide they steered away from their view of alcohol/drug use as suicide and defined suicide as the deliberate taking of one's own life. They indicated no knowledge of anyone in their congregations who had attempted or committed suicide, yet they reported knowledge of cases of drug abuse. This was felt to be a problem in the black community, but suicide was not. Clearly, while pastors saw alcohol and drug abuse as self-destructive behavior that could be viewed as a form of suicide, they distinguished between that and suicide as the intentional taking of one's life. The congregational respondents agreed with the pastors that alcohol/drug use destroys the body and therefore is a type of suicide. The questionnaire did not give the respondents the choice to make the distinctions the pastors made, but supposedly they would do so if given that choice.

From the interviews and surveys it appears that black Americans have a perception of themselves as being uniquely different from their white counterparts. Both pastors and their respective memberships believed that black Americans have a tendency to place a higher value on life and on the role of the family than white Americans. This is shown in responses to Statement 4 in Table 4. The pastors insist

that suicide is a "complete denial of the authority of God." The belief that "suicide is not within the framework of God's perfect will" was shared to the highest degree by 43 percent of those surveyed (see Statement 1 in Table 4). The pastors tended to see what they believed to be increases in suicide as an outgrowth of social "integration." Similarly, the respondents were in agreement with the statement that there was some relationship between black suicides and integration since the 1960s, but scored lower in consensus on this item than on some other items (see Statement 3 in Table 4).

When asked if they had knowledge of any suicides in their respective congregations the pastors responded almost unanimously that they had no knowledge of any attempted suicides or suicides in their congregations. However, more than 200 of the church members surveyed had knowledge of someone who has attempted suicide and 100 stated that they had knowledge of someone who has committed suicide (see Statements 19 and 20 in Appendix J). At first glance this would seem to indicate that the pastors were insulated from events or that they were misreporting in the interview. However, there are alternative explanations for the findings. One explanation is that the pastors were asked specifically if they had knowledge of someone in their congregations that had either attempted or committed suicide. On the other hand, the congregations were asked a more

general question of whether or not they had knowledge of someone who had attempted or committed suicide. It could be someone outside the congregation. The question can be interpreted as referring not only to blacks outside the congregation, but to whites or members of other racial and ethnic groups. It could also include knowledge of media-reported attempted and actual suicide cases. Another explanation is that all of those alleging to have knowledge of suicides and attempted suicides came from these churches and the vast majority came from only two of the churches which were within three blocks of each other and thus serving the same neighborhood. It could be, then, that all those responding had knowledge of the same small number of suicide and attempted suicide cases.

Suicide is perceived by the pastors as being beyond the black experience and a complete denial of what it means to be black. The African Americans responding to the survey also view suicide as a "white thing" that blacks just don't do. There is consensus among the pastors that suicide is a "white thing" and a denial of what it means to be black and three-fourths of the church respondents scored 3 or higher in agreement with the statement that suicide has always been a "white thing" that black Americans just would not do. However, it should be noted that there was less consensus on this issue than on the issue on theological views. Nearly a fourth indicated very low level of agreement. The pastors

were unequivocal in their statement of this view. The congregations, while largely in agreement, were more equivocal (see Statement 4 in Table 4).

The experience of Black Americans in the United States has been one of violence. Black Americans, according to the pastors and to 89.58 of those surveyed, are much more concerned about becoming victims of crime and drugs than becoming victims of suicide (see Statement 4 Appendix 2). Because suicide is not a part of their experience and was not perceived by church leaders as a "social problem" that has severe implications in the black community. Pastors were asked "Has suicide ever been discussed from the pulpit?" The pastors were uniform in replying that suicide is not an issue in the black community and need not be a topic for church sermons. They argued that suicide was not a problem in the black community that needed to be addressed by the church. However, violent crime and drugs in the community were so pronounced that they needed to be frequent topics of church sermons or Bible study discussions.

The contrasting beliefs regarding suicide versus drug abuse and violence was examined in the vignettes sections of the interview. However, the questionnaire did not contain items reflecting the vignettes. Overall, the views expressed by the pastors are shared by the survey respondents. The consensus was strongest on issues of religious beliefs about suicide and the significance of the

church in the black community. It was less strong on the uniqueness of suicide to whites. The congregations, while largely in agreement that suicide is something blacks just would not do, were less firm in that belief than their partners.

CHAPTER EIGHT SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As shown in Chapter 3, the black suicide rate is comparatively low. Although the difference in suicide rates for black and white males ages 20 to 34 is not great, there is no question that the overall rate of suicide among white Americans is about double the rate for black Americans. The question is, "Why is there little black suicide?" An answer that has been proposed by scholars is that the black church and family maintain social forces that would otherwise lead to suicide. The principal goal of this study was to investigate the extent to which this answer can be substantiated empirically. Emphasis was placed on the role of the black church, in particular, in transmitting and reinforcing a particular normative climate and social meaning of suicide which may sustain a lower rate of suicide than might be expected. The question also involves attempting to discern how suicide may be countered in the black community while other forms of life-threatening behavior such as crime and drugs appeared not to be countered.

It has already been suggested in the literature that the black church and its interaction with the family has had

a major influence in the low rate of suicide among African Americans. This study was not able to provide a definitive answer to the question of how important the black church has been in keeping the black suicide prevalence low. Nor did the study attempt a systematic comparison with the white community or religious groups. However, this study has offered a basis for at least tentative conclusions about the empirical reality of a religiously based narrative climate or set of social meanings that defines suicide as counter to God's will and unacceptable for black Americans and thereby functions to help keep the rate low.

The social meaning of suicide includes the norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding suicide. My focus is on the content of the shared social meaning in the black community and not the process through which those meanings are obtained by individuals. The church is a central place to explore the social meaning of suicide in the black community because of its historical, traditional and cultural significance to the black experience in America.

Sociological theories and studies of suicide have been heavily influenced by Durkheim. This study examined the issue of suicide within the black community beginning with a Durkheimian perspective. Durkheim posited that suicide was a social phenomenon. He proposed four categories of suicides: egoistic, anomic, altruistic and fatalistic. These categories were contingent upon the degree and nature

of individual integration into and regulation by the social collective. Spontatic suicide results from a weakening and loss of strong social ties to groups and collectivities. At the other extreme altruistic suicide results from excessive identification and integration into a collectivity. Anomic suicide is the result of the individual's normlessness and lack of regulation. Fatalistic suicide is the polar opposite of anomic suicide because it is the result of excessive regulation.

Durkheim's theory appears to have undergone at least two interpretations by modern sociologists relevant to the question of black suicide. The first departs from Durkheim's original four causes of suicide and the second follows Durkheimian tradition more closely. Those adhering to the first follow a "one cause" of suicide argument, combining both regulation and integration into a focus on social integration or disorganization (Cavan, 1988; Merton, 1966; Clewer & Ohilo, 1981). Cavan (1988) explained suicide in terms of the amount of anomie or personal disorganization experienced by the individual. This notion would lead one to expect high rates of deviance including suicide among blacks, as powerlessness, helplessness, and social disorganization characterize part of the African-American community. Merton (1936) proposed that high rates of deviance among lower class and minority groups would prevail when these groups failed to achieve cultural goals

of success. Similarly, Cohen (1981) and later Howard and Ellis (1981) attribute higher rates of deviance in the lower class structure to status frustration and blocked opportunity to meet legitimate demands of middle class standards.

Other theorists have followed more closely Durkheim's original theory of integration and regulation and stress excessive regulation (Henry & Short, 1954; Maria, 1965; Breda, 1976). Henry and Short (1954) reasoned that high rates of deviance could be explained in terms of "external restraints." Outward aggression and violence toward others, rather than self-destructive behavior, resulted when external restraint is high. Hence, greater external restraint in the lower class substructure results in a lower suicide rate. Maria (1965) refers to "external constraints" or lack of social integration to explain suicide. High external constraints reduced the likelihood of suicide. Breda (1976) viewed black suicide in terms of fatalistic suicide based on the Durkheimian idea of excessive regulation and forced division of labor.

That the influence of the black church on suicide may be important in the black community would seem to follow from both of these perspectives. If the anomie and social disorganization argument is followed there should be something in the black community counteracting the anomic effects on society, a role hypothesized to be played by the

church. If the external constraint and fatalism are separated, one may look to the church as providing mechanical solidarity and hope. Review of the literature with regard to the role of the church as a factor in the low suicide rates among African Americans indicates that its adherents were closely to the social and social-disorganization perspective. According to the literature, suicide rates are low because the church as well as other institutions (e.g., family and social organizations) provide a social interaction which buffers against a higher prevalence of suicide in the black community that would otherwise be expected.

By focusing on that body of literature this study also addressed the question as one of uncovering religious meanings that counter suicidal tendencies. It was primarily a qualitative/ethnographic one to understand whether or not the black church seems to be playing this suicide-buffering role hypothesized for it. The study focused on pastors as knowledgeable informant who could provide information on the social meaning of suicide in the black community. Data were collected primarily through face-to-face interviews with thirty black pastors. First they were asked general questions on suicide. Then, they were asked to respond to vignettes depicting situations of suicide, drug use, and crime. In addition to the interviews, survey questionnaires were administered to six church congregations

(8-120). The goal of the interview and questionnaire was to examine the extent to which church based views and norms in the black community act to buffer against a higher prevalence of suicide.

The focus of the interview was on religious and normative views of suicide, the relationship between the black church and family, and the extent to which church based attitudes/norms counter to suicide are transmitted in church. Pastors were interviewed to get their opinions of suicide in the black community as compared to other forms of deviance such as crime and drug abuse. There was a high level of consensus among the pastors. The literature on black suicide suggests that the church is pervasive in the black community and that its influence is an important factor in low suicide rates among African Americans. The pastors offer the same view. According to the pastors, the church is a refuge, problem-solver, liberator, and moral voice of the black community. Next, the church helps to unify the scattered blacks within the black community. They see the church as central to the black experience. This unity is promoted through the interplay of church and family. The prevailing attitude of the pastors is that "the church is our mother," "the church and family are one," and the church "acts to keep the family together." All of the pastors believe that the church meets the emotional and spiritual needs of its members. Unquestionably, the pastors

believe that the church has aided the black family. Given the importance of the church to the black experience proposed in the literature and by these pastors, the questions become, are there church-based attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs which appear to have an impact on suicidal behavior in the community?

The pastors were able to articulate religiously based beliefs about suicide which would appear to offer an affirmative answer. There is reason to conclude from the interviews that there are buffers against suicide among African Americans. The nature of these beliefs also offer some insights into why they seem to be protective of suicide, but not other forms of deviance. The view of the pastors, shared strongly by their congregations condems suicide as an unpardonable sin. The pastors also defined suicide as a "white thing" alien to the black experience. The congregations held this view as well, although with less conviction than the pastors.

Suicide is defined as unpardonable, unforgivable, and virtually unthinkable for blacks. Theologically, the pastors view suicide as being "sinful" and "against God's will." This notion of suicide as being "sinful" appears to be pervasive in the black community. Suicide does nothing for the "soul" except place it in peril of eternal damnation. The church recognizes no justification for suicide. Suicide is perceived as that which impedes the

individual from fulfilling what God intended the individual to do.

Although they knew directly of no suicide cases among their congregations, pastors offered two possible explanations for suicides among black Americans when it does occur. The first explanation related to a breakdown in religious values and family ties. The second explanation is related to the effects of racial integration. The belief is that blacks have assimilated white materialistic values that have weakened ties in the black community thereby making African Americans more susceptible to committing suicide. Hence, violence is perceived as being a by-product of assimilation through racial integration. That there is not more suicide, seems to be a reflection of both religious and secular norms of black identity.

Ultimately, suicide is perceived, both by pastors and a majority of the congregations, as not an inherent part of the black experience. This is why pastors don't discuss the issues of suicide from their pulpits. It's not seen as a black problem. The pastors reasoned, "why talk about suicide. Suicide is not an oversight, it just is not a problem. Why try to fix something if it is not broken?" suicide was perceived as a complete denial of black identity. Pastors were unanimous in their views that some of the problems which might lead to suicide by whites do not pose a threat to black Americans. This belief was shared to

more extent by most members of their congregations. Blacks have developed an apparent resilience to self-destructive behavior through the church and a "struggle"; both of which are inherently part of being black. To struggle and endure hardships teaches one to withstand sorrow and religious faith offers hope and the promise of a better life. Therefore, the church stands as a bastion in the struggle. It is the church that strengthens and bonds blacks out of a tradition shaped out of suffering. The church leaders point to the church as the institution primarily responsible for providing cultural integration which has sustained hope and resiliency which keeps suicide low.

Responses to the vignettes were analyzed to determine the extent to which difference existed between the normative attitude for suicide which is relatively low and other forms of behavior threatening to oneself and others, drug abuse and violence, which are relatively high in the black community. The pastors strongly and unequivocally condemned suicide. The pastors seemed to offer subtle rationalization of crime and drugs, on the other hand, that they did not offer for suicide. They condemned criminal and drug behavior and found it wholly unacceptable socially. Yet there was a shaded difference in attitudes toward suicide and these other deviant acts. Given the circumstances (e.g., economic, political and social deprivation) they

could "understand" the criminal behavior. These same circumstances were never offered to understand suicide.

A review of the surveys revealed that church members share the same beliefs of their pastors, although with varying degrees of consensus. Hence, the pastors' views are not unique alone. Church members believe religion is central to the black experience and responsible for unifying the black community. A vast majority believe that the strength of the church lies in the close relationship with the family such that the two are seen as one entity. The congregations overwhelmingly condemn suicide and believe that it is against God's will. Suicide remains an unpardonable sin in which one is sentenced to damnation. The congregations believe that blacks place a higher premium on life than whites. To pastors and congregations alike, suicide is a "white thing."

To the extent, then, that this shared social meaning radiates out into the black community as a whole, it should play a role in keeping black suicide low. I conclude therefore that there is some empirical support for the working hypothesis with which I began.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The conclusion is qualified by limitation of the research. The most obvious shortcoming of this study is in the self-selected or volunteer nature of the sample both

with regard to the interview informants and survey respondents. What I concluded with was primarily a voluntary self-selected sample. Not everyone wanted to talk with the researcher. Hence, the sampling procedure of this study was based essentially upon the self-limiting nature of the number of people that communicated with the researcher. A high illiteracy rate among black Americans in the community affected the way in which the researcher gathered the data. The instructions for completion of the questionnaires apparently were not clear to some respondents and interpretations of the survey results are limited by some uncertainty about just how to evaluate the responses on the 5-point scale.

A principal limitation includes the fact that no comparison was done with comparable white pastors and congregations. Future research should include a systematic comparison of white pastors and congregations. Also this study interviewed only pastors and surveyed only church congregations within the black community. No interviews or surveys were conducted beyond the church. Future research should focus outside of the black church to assess the extent to which the social meanings which I have uncovered in the church really pervade the black community. One way of conducting this research would be to interview and survey nonchurch participants or a general sample of black respondents. A lack of consensus among nonchurchgoers with

regard to suicide and other life-threatening behavior such as crime and drugs would suggest less significance of the role of the church. Conversely, solidarity with active churchgoers would confirm the pervasive nature of the church and the values expressed by church members within the black community.

This study did not look at the relationship between the black family and the church. Rather, it focused specifically on the role of the black church in constructing and reinforcing a particular social meaning of suicide that may act as a deterrent against a higher prevalence of suicide in the African-American community. Future research should interview/survey black families to examine the extent to which the church and its interaction with the family has been a major influence in the low rates of suicide among African Americans. Further, a systematic comparison with white families should be made to determine the importance of religion in keeping the suicide prevalence low and the extent to which religiously based social meanings define suicide. It may not be as much in the context of norms, but the integrative effect of religion.

Little (1983) argues that the overall low suicide rate among blacks is due to a high death rate among young black males. By the time the population has matured those who would have committed suicide later in life would have already killed themselves or have been killed by others.

Seider (1981) proposes that a "survivor hypothesis" exists among African Americans in which only the strongest blacks survive. "By the time these blacks reach senior citizen years, they have developed such a repertoire of coping strategies and have so many support mechanisms in an extended family network that suicide is not considered" (Blockswell, 1983, pp. 124-125). Moreover, it is suggested that whites do not confront the same social structure that generates deviance among African Americans. Future research might test these demographic hypotheses by comparing black/white death rates due to six structural causes (e.g., homicide, drug offenses, and traffic fatalities many of which are suicides or involve alcohol and drugs). The demographic argument suggests that the total death rate for young blacks should be greater than those for young whites. If this were the case, then those blacks (i.e., those who are prone to violence or risk taking, etc.) who may have otherwise committed suicide in their elderly years, did not survive. Therefore, elderly black suicide rates could remain low. To the extent that young whites have a better survival rate, more of them will survive and be vulnerable to suicide in their older years. Hence, the positive relationship between age and suicide for whites. Research could also be done to investigate, consistent with Seider's "survivor hypothesis" to see whether the coping strategies

and repertoire of young blacks are less developed and significantly different than older blacks.

Burkhead (1987/1988) proposed that poverty was in itself regulative under certain conditions. Another plausible hypothesis, therefore, is that excessive regulation and a forced division of labor and poverty are regulative and that there is nothing unique to the black experience that keeps the rate low. Whites in similar situations would also have low rates. Future research could test this hypothesis in a highly regulated environment such as a prison in which the regulative environment is essentially the same for both blacks and whites. If the social meaning of suicide that I have uncovered with black pastors and church members holds more generally among blacks, then, what we would expect in the prison would reflect what is evident in the black community with regard to suicide. In other words, black inmate suicide rates would be lower than white inmate suicide rates and suicide would be considered a "white thing" by black inmates even in a social system where both blacks and whites are highly regulated.

The data from the interviews and surveys in this study provide support for tentative conclusions about the socially inductive, suicide buffering forces operating in at least a significant portion of the African-American community. That tentative conclusion is that the church does provide a

negative climate which helps to keep the black suicide rate low. The theory-guided research goes beyond what is currently available in the literature and should provide the basis for further testing of the tentative conclusions.

APPENDIX 2
LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear Pastor:

This is to affirm that Kevin Early is a declared candidate in sociology in the process of carrying out his dissertation project. I am his adviser and chairman of his dissertation committee. His research project has been approved by this committee and the Department of Sociology. In our judgment the project is a significant one capable of contributing to knowledge and understanding of an important social issue. His research will investigate suicide and other life threatening behavior and the role that the church has played or could play in dealing with these social issues.

As a Pastor you are in a key position to offer insights and observations to aid his research. I would very much appreciate your kind cooperation in granting him a private and confidential interview to learn of your views on these matters.

Mr. Early will contact you personally. If you have any questions of me regarding this or the project, please do not hesitate to call me at 382-8265.

Sincerely,

Donald L. Adams
Professor of Sociology

APPENDIX B
EXPLANATION OF STUDY LETTER

Dear Pastor:

I am a candidate for the Ph.D. degree in Sociology at the University of Florida writing a dissertation on the causes and prevention of suicide (as well as other life threatening behavior such as drugs) in the African-American community. The enclosed correspondence from Dr. Ronald L. Akers, Professor of Sociology at the University of Florida, confirms my status as a doctoral student, as well as the nature of my research.

I feel that this study will provide invaluable information, as it is a study of the African-American church, examining its values, norms, beliefs, and social relations as related to these social issues.

This study will involve interviews with African-American pastors in Gainesville. I am writing to ask for your participation by granting me an interview. The interview will be approximately one hour. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Your participation in this study is critical. A follow-up phone call will be made to you to answer any questions you have about the study and to schedule appointments.

Thank you for your cooperation.

With kindest regards, I am

Sincerely,

Kevin E. Early

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What is your definition of suicide?
2. What is your attitude and theological view of suicide?
3. What is your church's position or attitude toward suicide?
4. Do you have knowledge of any member of your church congregation attempting or committing suicide?
5. What were the circumstances?
6. What is the role of religion within your community?
7. What is the role of the black church in the black community?
8. Is the black church a vital and integral part of the black family?
9. Do you have contact with your members on a regular basis?
10. How much does the church involve the family into its activities?
11. How does the black church view its role in the black family?
12. Has suicide ever been discussed from the pulpit?
13. What would you do if a member of your congregation talked about suicide?
14. What are the family activities or family centered activities in the church?
15. How do you encourage youth involvement and participation?
16. How are you involved in local community politics?
17. How are you involved in the "War on Drugs"?

APPENDIX D
VIGNETTE

Situation 1: A church member, whom you have known for years, has changed since her husband of forty years committed suicide after learning that he had prostate cancer. She stops relatively to herself, has dropped out of church activities, lost weight, and appears unkempt. At first you thought that her behavior was typical of mourning, but it has now been well over a year since her husband's demise and she appears to be getting worse instead of better.

1. What would you say about her husband's suicide?
2. How do you define this person's suicide?
3. How would the church respond to the widow?
4. Where would you start in handling this situation?
5. In what context as a clergyman would you talk to this person?
6. What step or action would you likely take to help get this woman re-directed or re-integrated into the church family?
7. Suppose you could have encountered her husband before his suicide?

APPENDIX E
VIGNETTE

Situation 2: A fifteen year old youth has reacted badly to his parent's divorce some months ago. Always misperverted, the child is now quiet and withdrawn. In school the child isolates himself from his peers and has dropped off the basketball team. His friends avoid him and his grades have dropped. His father who always active in his life, and you suspect that he feels abandoned by him. His mother, with whom he lives, tends to let him alone, to do whatever he wants. The child has told a school counselor that he is tired of living and that he would like to go to a far away problem-free place where he can find ultimate peace. The child insists that he is the reason that his parents aren't living together: He believes that the divorce would not have occurred if his parents really loved him. Frustrated, the child has come to you to tell you of his attempts to find a way to "escape from it all". Crying and rolling up his sleeves slowly, the child reveals scars where he has slashed his wrist several times.

1. What is your analysis of the problem?
2. Talk to me like you would talk to that boy regarding suicide.

3. How would you approach this boy's mentioning of suicide as a partner?
4. How would you evaluate the seriousness of the situation?

APPENDIX F
TINBERGEN

Background: Ernest is a 28-year-old, single, unemployed man who has a problem with alcohol and multiple drug abuse (marijuana, quaaludes, and crack). Ernest grew up in the church. He was baptized, sang in the youth choir, and always attended Sunday school and church services with his family. His family is still an active part of your congregation. Ernest, on the other hand, spends most of his time drinking very heavily with only several short periods of being sober. Ernest is still living at home with his parents. According to his mother, he comes and goes as he pleases. Ernest has been arrested several times by the local police and his drivers license was suspended over a year ago for driving while intoxicated. When Ernest is sober he makes an occasional appearance in church. However, when he is "high" he gets together with his old friends who, like him, abuse alcohol and drugs. Ernest needs help and his parents have asked you to intervene.

1. How would you evaluate the seriousness of the situation and what would you do about it?
2. How would you evaluate Ernest's behavior?

3. What steps or action would you take as pastor to re-diack or re-integrate Brown into the church family?
4. Talk to me like you would talk to Brown.

APPENDIX B
VIGNETTES

Situation 1: Charles is an eighteen-year-old youth who has just been arrested and charged with the murder of another youth. Charles grew up in the black community in Sedgewick where he lived with his mother, a member of your church, and five siblings. Charles never knew his father, as his father abandoned his mother when he was an infant. As the oldest of six children, Charles spent most of his time caring for his younger brothers and sisters while his mother worked as a janitor in a downtown bank. Charles was an average student in high school until he dropped out in his junior year. He claims that he dropped out of school for good reasons. Frustrated, Charles began acting out at home and stealing from his mother's purse. Finally, Charles' mother told him he either get a job or go back to school where he could get his diploma. Unable to get a job, Charles got involved in law violations.

1. How would you evaluate Charles' behavior?
2. How would you evaluate the seriousness of Charles' situation?
3. In your role as a clergyman, how would you approach this situation?

4. What steps would you take or action would you likely take to re-direct the youth into the church family?

APPENDIX B
SURVEY

Some of the questions are statement opinions. For these, please express, on a five-point scale from 1 to 5, the extent of your agreement with the feeling expressed in each of the statements to your own personal feelings. [In response to questions the following instructions were given. If you circle 1 that means you disagree with the statement. Please circle one of the other four numbers if you agree with the statement.]

DIRECTIONS: Please do not write your name on this survey. Therefore, feel free to be very honest. Indicate your responses by circling the appropriate answer. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.

What is your denomination?

Adventist AME Baptist CME Methodist Pentecostal

What is your present age?

under 18 18-19 20-27 28-45 46 or older

What is your sex?

male female

What is your present marital status?

single married divorced

1. The taking of one's own life is not within the framework of God's perfect will.
1 2 3 4 5
2. The use of alcohol and drugs is a type of suicide because it destroys the body, which is the temple of God.
1 2 3 4 5
3. There is some evidence that suicide may be increasing among black (or African) Americans. This is because of integration since the 1950s.
1 2 3 4 5
4. The church has always been a central gathering place where black (or African) Americans could get together not only for worship but for other social and political activities.
1 2 3 4 5
5. People who commit suicide lose their souls and spend eternity in hell.
1 2 3 4 5
6. Black (or African) Americans are much more concerned about becoming victims of crime and drugs than becoming victims of suicide.
1 2 3 4 5

7. Black (or African) Americans are more likely to commit crimes against other black Americans than against white Americans because the penalties are not as severe.
- 1 2 3 4 5
8. Black (or African) Americans have a tendency to cherish or place a higher value on life and on the family role than white Americans.
- 1 2 3 4 5
9. The ties between the church and the family in the black (or African) American community are so close that they are basically one and the same.
- 1 2 3 4 5
10. Racism has always been a "white thing" that black (or African) Americans just would not do.
- 1 2 3 4 5
11. The church has been the primary liberator and educator of black (or African) Americans in the United States.
- 1 2 3 4 5
12. Pastors are among the most informed persons in the black (or African-American) community and provide the most important source of leadership.
- 1 2 3 4 5
13. At this church, suicide is seldom mentioned in sermons from the pulpit or in Bible study.
- 1 2 3 4 5

14. At this church, the problem of violent crime and drugs in the black (or African-American) community is frequently a topic of sermons or discussing in Bible study.

1 2 3 4 5

15. There are many family-oriented activities in this church.

1 2 3 4 5

16. Youth involvement and participation is encouraged in the church.

1 2 3 4 5

17. The pastor is actively involved in community politics.

1 2 3 4 5

18. The pastor is actively involved in the "War on Drugs".

1 2 3 4 5

19. Do you have knowledge of someone who has attempted suicide?

none 1 person 2 persons 3 or more persons

20. Do you have knowledge of someone who has committed suicide?

none 1 person 2 persons 3 or more persons

APPENDIX I
INFORMED CONSENT

READ TO ALL RESPONDENTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SESSION

My name is Kevin S. Early. I am a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Florida. I am conducting a study to investigate suicide and other life threatening behavior within the black (or African) American community. My focus is on the role that the African-American church has played or could play in dealing with these social issues.

A questionnaire will be distributed to each member of the congregation. I will give you instructions for filling it out in a moment. Please mark your answers directly on the survey sheets. After completing the survey, please turn the surveys in to me or to the usher before I leave the sanctuary.

Remember, you are a volunteer in this project and you may withdraw at anytime. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer. Please do not write your name on the surveys. This procedure ensures anonymity of responses so that you may feel free to answer as you honestly feel. Your responses are anonymous. By completing the surveys you are giving your consent to participate.

NO FURTHER ARRANGS FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION ARE INVOLVED.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Kevin E. Early

Principal Investigator

Department of Sociology

APPENDIX J SURVEY RESULTS

DESCRIPTION	INDICATOR
Adventist	19.8
African Methodist Episcopal	20.8
Baptist	15.1
Christian Methodist Episcopal	1.1
United Methodist	17.8
Presbyterian	27.8
Age	
Under 20	14.8
20-29	22.8
30-39	26.8
40-49	18.8
45 or older	26.8
Sex	
Male	27.8
Female	23.8
RACIAL GROUP	
Anglo	14.8
Spanish	28.8
Hispanic	8.1

STATEMENT

	1	2	3	4	5	6-200
1. The teaching of man's own life is not within the framework of God's perfect will.	9-8	1-3	9-9	12-4	20-7	8-214
2. The use of alcohol and drugs is a type of suicide because it destroys the body, which is the temple of God.	10-5	1-9	5-8	12-8	57-8	8-216
3. There is some evidence that suicide may be increasing among black (or African) Americans. This is because of depression since the 1960s.	9-1	15-3	11-3	12-3	19-3	8-218
4. The church has always been a center gathering place where black (or African) Americans could get together not only for worship, but for other social and political activities.	4-7	4-7	11-8	18-8	45-8	8-226
5. People who commit suicide lose their souls and spend eternity in hell.	4-9	8-1	20-5	22-3	47-3	8-211
6. Black (or African) Americans are much more concerned about becoming victims of crime and drugs than becoming victims of suicide.	9-1	9-4	19-7	13-1	36-8	8-215

REMARKS

	1	2	3	4	5	6-100
7. Black [or African] Americans are more likely to commit crimes against other black Americans than against white Americans because the Americans believe the punishment are not as severe.	3-4	38.7	33.8	35.3	38.8	38-100
8. Black [or African] Americans have a tendency to obtain or place a higher value on life and on the family role than white Americans.	4-6	35.4	35.7	35.7	36.8	38-100
9. The gap between the black church and the family in the black community are so close that they are basically one in the same.	4-8	34.4	36.0	36.0	37.8	38-100
10. Religion has always been a "white thing" that black [or African] Americans just would not do.	3-4	30.1	35.3	37.0	33.4	38-100
11. The church has been the primary institution and supporter of black [or African] Americans in the United States.	3-8	4.8	33.8	36.4	41.4	38-100

REMARKS

12. Pastors are among the most informed persons in the black (or African-American) community and provide the most important source of leadership.
1.7 8.8 13.3 55.3 28.8 8-21.6
13. In this church, violence in action mentioned in numerous free the pulpit or in Bible study.
12.3 20.4 18.2 27.7 28.8 8-21.6
14. At this church, the problem of violence arises and drops in the black (or African-American) community is frequently a topic of discussion or discussion in Bible study.
7.8 22.8 20.3 28.3 21.4 8-20.8
15. There are many family-oriented activities in this church.
2.4 6.6 14.8 28.3 27.2 8-20.4
16. Both involvement and participation is encouraged in the church.
2.3 4.1 7.8 27.3 28.7 8-20.8
17. The pastor is actively involved in community politics.
3 20.8 14.4 27.4 20.8 8-20.4

Summary

18. The pastor is actively involved in the "war on drugs."

1 2 3 4 5 N=206

1.0 0.0 20.0 20.0 40.0 N=207

19. Do you have knowledge of someone who has attempted suicide?

07.4 10.2 6.7 8.3 N=218

20. Do you have knowledge of someone who has committed suicide?

04.2 8.0 3.4 3.4 N=214

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kevin Eugene Early is the son of Eugene and Jocelyn C. Early. He was born on February 26, 1918, at Chelsea Naval Hospital, Chelsea, Massachusetts. His father was in the United States Air Force, which accounted for his frequent moves throughout his early childhood.

Most of his elementary and secondary education was obtained in Massachusetts, Japan, Hawaii, and New Hampshire. In 1939, Kevin began his post-secondary education in New Orleans, Louisiana. After three and a half years of study, he earned his baccalaureate degree in political science and graduated cum laude from Willard University in May of 1943. Upon receipt of his bachelor's degree, Kevin received a full fellowship from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he obtained a master's degree and certificate in Latin American and Western Studies in 1944. Following graduation, Kevin received a research grant from the Government of Portugal, Ministerio de Cultura e Educacao. Kevin moved to Lisbon, Portugal, and later earned a diploma from the Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa. In August 1946, Kevin was admitted into the doctoral program of the Sociology Department at the

University of Florida. He obtained a second master's degree in Sociology in May of 1961.

Revin has more than five years of career service and professional experience working in the areas of mental health and corrections. While pursuing his graduate studies in Gainesville, he worked full-time for the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services as a unit treatment rehabilitative specialist certified counselor at North Florida Evaluation and Treatment Center in Gainesville, Florida. Additionally, Revin worked full-time for the Florida Department of Corrections as a prison services counselor III at Marion Correctional Institution (Tier III Substance Abuse Program), in Levens, Florida.

Revin was married May 11, 1968, to Bonnie L. Rayfield, an attorney and graduate ofillard University and New York University Law School. Hopes for the future include the continued close relationship with his wife, as well as the beginning of a family together.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Ronald L. Allen, Chairman
Professor of Sociology

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This dissertation was submitted to the graduate faculty of the Department of Sociology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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